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BEADLE'S

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"NOW DO YOU KNOW ME? I AM SHADOW SAM, THE DETECTIVE!"

OR,

The RING DETECTIVE'S TRANSFORMATION.

A Tale of Wild Life Under the Canvas
in the Far West.

BY DAVID DRUID.

CHAPTER I.

THE CIRCUS IN TOWN.

"HOORAY, boys! hyar they come! This ar the day we celebrate. The great high cockalorum show; the greatest show on earth ar comin'! Turn out, all on ye, and see the elephant, the jagger, and the great ring-tailed

rhinoceros of the Rhine! Hoop-lal turn out, every man on ye, for they're comin' sure!"

These utterances, belched forth by as sound a pair of lungs as ever drew Western air, smote upon the startled hearing of a large number of the denizens of Sunrise City, who were congregated in the bar-room of the important hotel of the place, the "Gold Brick."

The scene was a common one in any Colorado mining-town. About tables were gathered votaries of chance, playing at cards and dice. Others were lounging at the bar.

Every man was upon his feet instantaneously at this sudden eruption, and every eye was fixed upon the speaker.

Hard Fist Bill was the euphonious title he wore in Sunrise City, and he was a good specimen of the conglomerated Western miner, dead-beat, and desperado. He had won his name of Hard Fist from the fact that he possessed a pair of fists heavier than a sledge-hammer, as many an unlucky pilgrim, who had dared his ugly temper, could attest.

The effect of Hard Fist's declaration that the "show was coming" upon the occupants of the bar-room was most intense. Every man was upon his feet, and a rush was made for the door.

"Give us room thar!"

"Ther show's a-comin'!"

"Git out ther way!"

It was push, jam, and struggle until the bar-room was cleared.

For weeks the town of Sunrise had been billed by huge, flaming posters, announcing that the "Great Consolidated, Gigantic Unparalleled Circus" of Wilkins and West would visit the place upon a given date.

The day had arrived, and such an event in Sunrise City, was a matter of no little social importance. The sight which met the gaze of the citizens was an enlivening one.

Heavy vans and animal cages drawn by stout-limbed horses, gorgeous chariots with playing bands, processions of tinsel-attired courtiers and ladies of court, followed by camels, elephants, and, in fact, all the usual paraphernalia of the average circus, were in line.

The great show received an enthusiastic ovation. Loud cheers and cries of approval greeted them. The quiet of the little mining-town among the mountains of Colorado was succeeded by genuine pandemonium.

The officers of the city's somewhat meager government met the circus representatives and a place upon what might have been called the village green was accorded them upon which to pitch the canvas.

"We're going to give you a big show," declared Ross Wilkins, the leading man of the circus. "The biggest show that ever visited this part of Colorado."

"Well, that's what we want," returned Hard Fist Bill, who chanced to be near and overheard this remark. "We'll all like you if you'll use us well."

"Are you hard to please," asked the show manager. "I've played to critical audiences."

"Reckin' yer don't know much about Sunrise City," asserted the Hard Fist, "we're a pretty high-toned lot up here. We don't put up with anythin' cheap, you bet. Yer want kinder git on ther right side ther boys you know or like enough, down'll come yer canvas."

"Is that so?" asked Wilkins, with a steely glitter in his eyes. "well, I've heard that kind of thing before. But I was always able to go them kind of people two ter one, and hain't never got left yet."

"But yer mought just ther same."

"Look here!" exclaimed Wilkins, "you've got a pretty good mouth, my friend. What'll yer sell it for?"

"Eh, what d'yer say?" blustered big Bill brustling up.

"Oh, go easy. I don't want to walk on yer. But look yer—see that? That's a ticket to ther show and a V. I want yer to go down inter ther city, and blow for my show. Will you do it?"

"Do it?" grunted big Bill, seizing the money and the ticket with avidity; "bet yer life I will; an' if I do say it myself, yer couldn't hire a bel-lows, that could do ye any better work."

Ross Wilkins turned away with a laugh, and entered the show tent. Only part of it had been raised, but a large gang of men were hard at work, driving stakes and splicing ropes. It was a scene of general activity, and called for a cool head and master hand to successfully direct.

But Wilkins's partner, Billy West, was an unequaled man to execute such a thing. While he attended to this part of the work, Wilkins looked after the attractions, hired and paid the actors,

and did the general advertising. They were a good team, and were winning a great record as show managers.

Apart from the show tent, Wilkins had a small tent, in which he had a writing-table and chairs. He entered this now, and was somewhat surprised to find a man sitting in one of the chairs, who arose as he entered. A cursory glance, revealed the man as of medium stature, and rather slender frame; and olive Italian-like features.

"Well?" asked Wilkins, in a brusque way; "what can I do for you, my friend?"

"Are you the show manager?" inquired the man, in a soft-toned voice.

"I am."

"Then you are the man I want to see. I've been up here in the mines and have had hard luck, and would like to get an engagement."

"An engagement?"

"Yes."

Wilkins looked critically at the man. Something in his manner impressed him.

"What sort of an engagement do you want?" he asked.

"As an actor. I have played to audiences before. I am an athlete, and can do anything. I traveled through Germany once, as the snake man, or wonderful contortionist."

"Athlete, eh?" ejaculated Wilkins. "Well, our bill is pretty well filled with actors of that class. Unless you could do something extraordinary, I could hardly give you any encouragement."

"Is that all you will require?" queried the other, eagerly.

"Of course. I am always looking for new features. If you can outdo my other men, then I want you, do you see?"

"Enough! Will you give me a trial?"

"Yes."

With this Wilkins accompanied the stranger to the ring. And there he received a startling surprise. He had been in the show business many years, and had brought out some of the greatest stars of the day, but never a man to equal this one.

All sorts of unheard of feats were performed. The athlete would twist and contort himself into impossible shapes, turn all sorts of maneuvers upon the flying-trapeze, and, in fact, so far outdid any star that Wilkins had, that he was eager to secure the stranger's services. The bargain was made quickly.

"Your contract reads for one year," said the circus manager. "Now, what name shall I put on the bills?"

"Ariel," replied the athlete. "It is the name I have always traveled under."

"A capital name!—the tricky Ariel! Excellent!" cried Wilkins, enthusiastically. "Ariel the Athlete! That will read grand on the bills. I am glad to welcome you to our coterie of artists."

"I will do my best," replied Ariel, modestly, "and I will be on hand at the performance this afternoon."

With this he left Wilkins to himself. The show manager felt unusually delighted with his new acquisition, and at once caused the show artist to print with his own hands, a special placard, to be placed in the bar-room of the "Gold Brick."

"A NEW AND WONDERFUL FEATURE,

"SECURED AT AN ENORMOUS EXPENSE.

"ARIEL THE ATHLETE.

"The most wonderful contortionist on American soil to-day. Absolutely unparalleled. A real human snake. Secured from Germany, at an enormous expense and trouble."

This placard was posted ostentatiously in the bar-room of the hotel. The frequenters of the place all read it, and it promised to be a drawing "card." Shortly before noon, Wilkins walked down to the "Gold Brick" to see what effect the proclamation had upon the people.

So he sauntered into the bar-room, and up to the bar counter, and as he did so, was touched upon the shoulder.

He wheeled, and found himself face to face with a man of remarkable appearance. He gave a violent start as he ejaculated.

"What! Sam Sanborn, is it you?"

"Yes," replied the other in a voice almost a whisper. "You know me I see. But, come over here and sit down at a table. I want to talk with you upon a very important subject."

Wilkins obeyed the request readily. He knew the man before him quite well, and entertained considerable respect for him. To the inmates of the place he was not known, as he was dressed in miner's garb, the same as others present, and

there was nothing in his appearance which, in their eyes, would have been out of the ordinary.

He was a man of medium height, and extremely slender but remarkably supple of frame. His features were keen and fox-like, such of them as were recognizable beneath a full sandy beard. A close observer would have perceived that he was an extremely sharp man.

And indeed he was sharp. Sam Sanborn was his name, but he was commonly known as Shadow Sam, the Ring Detective. For a long time, he had been identified with the profession, and few could equal him.

"I want to ask you a question in the first place," remarked Sanborn as they seated themselves at the table. "Is Petite Julie with you now, and billed to ride her horse in this town?"

The detective's manner was strangely significant, and impressed Wilkins. The two men gazed steadily at each other.

"Petite Julie is one of my attractions here," the showman replied. "The town is billed for her to appear."

"Well, you must not allow her to appear."

"What?"

"Have a report circulated, as speedily as possible, that she has returned East. Have her smuggled away somewhere. If you do not, I fear serious consequences."

Wilkins was astounded. The child rider was one of his greatest attractions. He could not speak for some moments, but gazed dumfounded at Shadow Sam.

"Will you explain yourself?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the detective with a glint in his eyes. "But first I want to make another assertion. Keep an eye out. Look in your boots before you put 'em on. Don't forget it now, for I am telling you the sober solemn truth. You are in mortal danger. There are human hounds upon your track, and in this town at this moment, who mean to kill you."

CHAPTER II.

A DARK PURPOSE.

SHADOW SAM's words were delivered with such earnestness as to carry conviction with them. Ross Wilkins was overcome with astonishment. He was not conscious of the fact that he had enemies. It was a startling revelation—that his life was in peril.

But before going further, it might be well to enlighten the reader, somewhat, in regard to Petite Julie, the famous child rider, and her life history, as she is to form one of the important characters of this story.

It is an old tradition, nevertheless in many cases an actual fact, that children of more than ordinary brightness are kidnapped by unscrupulous parties to be trained for work in the arena. Many of the greatest circus lights in this country were brought up from tender years by circus people, and were never suffered to know the blessings of a mother or home.

While it may not be said that Petite Julie, the popular and beautiful child rider, was one of this class, yet there was a cloud of obscurity over her origin. Some said that she was the child of wealthy parents and had been kidnapped. However this might be, Ross Wilkins, who had been the child's guardian from early years, would never divulge aught concerning the little girl's origin or history. He was reticent with regard to the child's past. He would only state that her father was the son of wealthy parents, and had married against their wishes a girl in a lower walk of life, yet respectable.

Exiled from home the young man had lived but a year. The mother, driven to it by poverty, became an equestrienne in a circus. But she, too, died when Julie was but two years old, leaving the child in Ross Wilkins' care.

This was substantially the truth, and all that the circus manager would vouchsafe to reveal, but people knew that there was, back of all this, many tangled threads of life history and mystery.

So now, when the circus detective, Shadow Sam, came to him and made the startling assertion that there were men upon his track who sought his life, he was not exactly the victim of fear, but perplexed and anxious.

He returned Shadow Sam's penetrating gaze.

"Are you not mistaken?" he asked.

"No, sir; I do not speak from mere guess or supposition; there are assassins upon your track to my certain knowledge."

"Who are they?"

The detective shook his head.

"I do not know," he replied. "There are two of them, and they are the sharpest foxes I ever attempted to trail. They are close upon your track and you can rest assured they are in earn-

est. Yet, I will say, it is not your life they seek, but little Julie's!"

"My God!" ejaculated Wilkins. "It is incredible! Two human brutes seeking the innocent life of that sweet little child! I can hardly realize it. Why should it be? What is their hellish motive?"

"Ah, that is it!" rejoined Sam. "That is the mystery. Why should they seek her life? She never harmed anybody. But, she is in somebody's way. Somebody has employed these two men to follow her up, and they will not desist until their fiendish purpose is accomplished."

"Why does not God send a wrathful bolt and strike them dead?" cried Wilkins intensely. "I warn them not to come in my way. I will have them flayed alive."

"And I warn you to keep a lookout for them," rejoined Shadow Sam. "They will pounce upon you when you least expect it. Don't be overconfident. Look out for them!"

"I will do that," assented Wilkins earnestly. "But, I cannot understand it. Why do they seek the child's life?"

"I thought that you might be able to help me fathom that question," intimated the detective. "There are facts pertaining to the girl's early life which you are needlessly reticent upon. If you would give them to me I think we could soon find a motive."

The detective spoke earnestly, but the showman only shook his head.

"I can tell you nothing more than you already know," he replied.

"But you know more?"

"Perhaps so, but it would not aid you. However, I am glad you have accorded me this warning, and I will be upon the watch. I will warn Julie to look out for strangers, and, in the meanwhile, if you can get on the track of these fiends shoot them both. Give them no mercy! I will stand at your back!"

The detective departed in a not over-satisfied state of mind. He knew that Wilkins was withholding information which would contribute to enlighten him, and his refusal to accord it only plunged him into a deeper whirl of mystery.

Why should these two hired assassins seek the life of Petite Julie? Who could be so base, so brutal, as to seek to crush out the life of an innocent child? Surely the motive must be a strong one.

Shadow Sam had solved many cases of mystery and crime, but never a one of such peculiar aspect as this.

After leaving the bar-room, he strolled down through the town, the while deeply buried in thought.

He was a stranger to all in the place, and nobody recognized him. Finally he made his way back, through the principal street, to the "Gold Brick."

The town was filled with new-comers from the smaller places near by. The "Gold Brick" was taxed to its fullest capacity, and its register list was full.

All was a state of great activity over the show. Everybody was discussing the list of attractions, and preparing to attend the afternoon performance.

As the detective neared the hotel entrance, he saw standing by the door a tall, splendidly-formed young man of athletic build and handsome, open features. He was dressed well in a short velvet coat with light pants, patent-leather shoes, and wore a polished silk hat. His dress was quite at variance with the common miner's garb which predominated, and by strangers he might have been taken for a snob.

But, every body in Sunrise City, knew and respected Harry Hastings, or "Nobby Harry" as he was better known. He was a gentleman, and possessed of nerve and a winning way which made friends for him among even the roughest of the miners.

He was the son of the magnate and first resident of Sunrise City—Colonel Edward Hastings whose fine residence stood upon the hill and looked down the main street. The Hastingses were leaders in the small but select circle of society in Sunrise.

Of course, Nobby Harry was a stranger to the detective, and Sam gave him a critical glance as he passed.

As the detective entered the bar-room, a man coming out jostled him. He was a tall, dark-featured man, attired in somewhat seedy civilian's garb and wore a soft felt hat pulled over his eyes. The detective halted at sight of him and an instant light of distrust shone in his eyes. He had seen this man before, and in his sight he was an object of suspicion.

Just outside the door sat a little white Spitz dog, a harmless pet creature. The man chanced

to see him as he came out of the bar-room, and an evil light shone in his eyes. He betrayed his malicious nature by turning from his path and bestowing a kick upon the little creature which sent it pitifully howling into the dusty street.

It was a needless and most malicious act. It astonished those who saw it and instantly all eyes were fixed sharply upon the human brute. It was possible that somebody from the rough gang of loungers might have taken the dog's part, even had it not been for its owner Nobby Harry, who stepped forward with fire flashing from his blue eyes.

"Look here, my friend, what did you do that for?"

The man turned and gazed insolently at Harry.

"What's ther matter with yer? Keep yer dog out of ther way."

"The dog was not in your way," cried Harry, hotly.

"Yes he was."

"I deny it. The crowd will testify."

A murmur of approval came from the bystanders. The detective came out of the bar-room, impressed with curiosity to see how the affair would come out. The stranger's face was black with rage. It was evident he was not in a pleasant frame of mind.

"Look here you young puppy," he cried. "Do you mean to say I'm a liar? If you do, I'll send you after your."

"I don't think you will!" declared Harry, coolly. "I don't know who you are, but I can tell you one thing, if you don't apologize for this insulting talk I'll make an example of you before this crowd."

It was plain the stranger was in an ugly frame of mind, and would not brook opposition. He also apparently regarded Harry as a species of dude whom he could easily bulldoze. But, he was destined to learn his mistake.

"You don't know who I am?" he asked. "We'll, probably you don't, my name is Al Perkins. I am from St. Louis, and I am a slugger. Moreover, my friend, I'm going to give you a good lesson in manners. I mean to pound your head for you."

"Do you?" queried Harry, with a calm glitter in his eyes. "Maybe you are barking up the wrong tree."

"I guess not. If you ain't a squealer you'll fight."

"Fight?" cried Harry, throwing off his velvet coat. "No! but I'll teach you a lesson, you contemptible coyote!"

The crowd cheered and a ring was formed. Nobody feared for Nobby Harry, for all knew him to be an adept boxer. The affair created an instant stir about the hotel.

The detective was an interested spectator. He saw that Nobby Harry's antagonist was a heavier man, and for a time he feared for the result. But his doubts were speedily dispelled.

CHAPTER III.

A TIMELY SHOT.

THERE were enough present to direct arrangements and see fair play. It was nothing unusual for a dispute or an insult to be settled in this manner, in the public street. Such are Western ideas of "law and order."

So nobody sought to interfere in the fight. Rather, bystanders endeavored to encourage the contestants.

They were soon ready, both had stripped to the waist, and now faced each other in the impromptu ring.

The ball was opened by Perkins, who assailed Harry fiercely, making use of an ugly upper-cut blow, which would have done credit to a Sullivan. But, Harry merely stood upon the defensive, and made no effort to push the fighting.

"Hip-hooray! Go in and win, me goslins! That's it! Sock it to him in the neck, hit him on the ear! Yah-yah! I'm the pedro for yer, on thet biz. I'm the Hard Fist, I am! Gimme a crack at ther dummy!"

High above the acclamations of the crowd arose this trumpet voice, and Hard Fist Bill "half seas over," forced himself through the throng.

"Best show on earth!" he yelled, discordantly. "Bet your bumpkins on that! Go any man two ter one, Nobby Harry biffs him in the nose this air time. Hooray, boys! look at that! Give it to him, Harry! Hit him on the neck, I say!"

It really seemed as though Nobby Harry profited by this discordant bit of advice, for his very next blow did take his enemy full and fair in the neck. It staggered him, and the young

man seeing his advantage, closed upon his antagonist.

Close and swift were the blows sent in upon Perkins's head and face. In vain he attempted to offset such a display of science with brute force, but, in less time than it takes to tell it, he was the worst-whipped man seen in that locality for some time, while Nobby Harry was practically unhurt.

How the miners cheered and applauded the victor! Big-hearted men they were, most of them, and advocates of right and fair play, and they knew that it was meet that Harry should win the battle.

The crestfallen Perkins, with battered face, picked himself up and hobbled away through the crowd, and was soon out of sight.

Nobby Harry came in for an ovation. While the detective, Shadow Sam, admired the young man's pluck and the admirable execution he had used, he did not pause to shake hands with him nor to congratulate him as the others did. He was alive to a sense of duty, and believing in the prime importance of such a measure, he proceeded to shadow, or follow, Al Perkins.

The villain, for such he undoubtedly was, did not linger about the spot, but set out at a slinking gait down the principal street of the town. He paused at a watering-trough, washed the blood from his face, and then started down a side-street.

The detective followed him as closely as caution would permit, and all at once received a startling surprise. Two men seemed to have emerged from behind a building, and were talking with Perkins.

Brutish, desperate-looking men they were.

"That is the coterie," the detective muttered. "they are the hired assassins who mean to kill little Julie. But"—and he set his teeth firmly—"they will never do it, if my life will save hers!"

The three villains held a somewhat lengthy conference. Sam regretted keenly that he could not get near enough to overhear the conversation. At length they moved away in the direction of the circus-grounds.

The detective consulted his watch; it was just after noon, and he exclaimed, hastily:

"I'll just have time to reach the circus before the show begins. It is very important that I should be there!"

He set out at a rapid gait for the show-grounds. He soon reached them, and, entering the tent, mingled with the crowd, where we will leave him for a while.

The interior of the tent presented an enlivening appearance. The seats were packed, the auditorium being full, and there was a smile upon Ross Wilkins's face. It would be a profitable day. All the towns and camps near Sunrise had turned out their quota.

The two bands, at opposite ends of the mammoth tent, were playing lively airs. There was a hum of busy talk among the spectators, and all were upon the *qui vive* for the opening of the performance.

The scene in the dressing-tents was quite different.

Tinsel-attired actors and actresses were rushing about in the wildest confusion. The ringmaster's voice was heard calling for the first act.

This was grand and lofty tumbling by seven actors, and immediately after it came trapeze performances.

In these Ariel the Athlete made his first appearance, and drove the crowd wild with enthusiasm. He was vociferously recalled. Ross Wilkins congratulated himself upon the acquisition of such a star.

And now was announced the wonderful bare-back riding of Petite Julie, a child of thirteen years.

There rode into the ring upon a cream-white horse, a young girl, almost woman, in point of grace and beauty of form, yet plainly a child in years, with a face as sweet and delicate as a lily.

Petite Julie bowed her acknowledgement of the round of applause which greeted her, and then leaped nimbly to her feet upon the horse's back.

Now the horse cantered slowly about the ring.

The child-rider pirouetted, danced, turned somersets, and performed other evolutions. Then the horse began to go faster. Paper hoops were brought out for her to leap through, and finally she sprang gracefully from her horse's back into the center of the ring, and bowed to the thunderous applause.

There was one person in the crowd who watched her with more than ordinary interest. Seated near a bend in the canvas, Nobby Harry

had viewed her riding with his heart in his mouth. From the moment of her appearance to her leave-taking of the ring, he regarded her with an all-absorbing light of interest in his eyes.

"She is like a dream," he murmured, rapturously, "truly she is beautiful. Too frail and fair for such a life as this!"

All unconscious of this expression of sentiment in her behalf, Julie the child-rider made her way back to her dressing-room. She threw herself upon a pile of blankets as she entered, and her bosom rose and fell with the violence of the exercise she had been taking.

Ross Wilkins and several of the waiting-women were present, and one of the latter exclaimed:

"Oh, little Julie, how can you ride so beautifully? You are as graceful as a spirit."

"I presume I was born to ride in this way," replied the girl, with an odd light in her eyes. "But I sometimes tire of so much excitement. I would like to live a quiet life, be a nice lady for a while, to see how it would seem."

"You would not endure it," asserted Wilkins, who always took care to guard her from dissatisfaction. "You were, as you say, born to ride, and it is your natural sphere. One is always unhappy outside of that."

"It may be so," returned the child-rider, listlessly. "But it is not always easy to determine what one's sphere is."

Then she sprang up with a rippling laugh.

"What is the use of getting glum?" she cried. "But I have not much more than time in which to don my blue satin and ride Firefly in the last bareback act."

A call from the ring drew Wilkins away, and the serving-maids quitting the apartment, Julie was left alone. She proceeded hastily to dress herself for the next act, which would speedily come.

She was not alarmed at being left alone, although she had been warned by Wilkins to be upon her guard. She had laughed at his fears and declared them groundless. It was hard for her to believe that any one sought her life, and she considered it all a groundless fear.

But she was startled when, suddenly, she heard a low voice behind her. With an instinctive sense of peril, she turned, and nearly fainted with horror at a terrible sight which met her gaze.

From opposite sides of the canvas, through openings which they had cut, there stepped forth two dark-browed, evil-faced ruffians, each with a knife, long and keen, in hand. They were regarding Julie with a glowering expression, and her little heart almost ceased to beat as she realized that they were her foes, and had come there to take her life.

She could not move or even cry out. A terrible power held her rooted to the spot. A deadly fascination seized her as she gazed at these two human monsters. They glared at her like serpents ready to strike. Then one of them spoke.

"Close in on her Hank. Don't give her a chance to yell."

It seemed to break the spell. Julie recovered herself with a mighty gasp, and a shriek, loud and terrifying, broke from her lips.

Then the fiends closed in upon her. The deadly knives flashed in the air, as murderous blows were aimed at her. She seemed possessed of an energy born of despair, and dodged them.

But she could not hope to escape them long. One keen blade was uplifted in air over her head, when, at a most opportune moment, the curtains at the end of the apartment, parted, and a man sprang into view.

It was Ariel, the Athlete!

Simultaneous with his appearance, a revolver flashed in his right hand, and a sharp report rung out. One of the assassins fell, while the other, with a baffled howl sprang back out of the tent, just in time to avoid the second shot.

And Petite Julie sunk in a swoon into Ariel's arms.

"One of the human wolves has passed in his chips," he muttered. "I wish I could have winged the other."

The next moment the tent was filled with an excited crowd of actors and attendants. Ross Wilkins came rushing in like a maniac.

"Is she hurt?" he cried.

"No," replied Ariel quietly. "She is only in a faint."

Action was taken to bring her out of the swoon. Then Ariel explained all to Wilkins. When he had finished his graphic recital, the circus manager gripped his hand saying warmly:

"You have made a hero of yourself, Ariel. You have saved the life of one of God's purest angels in the flesh."

"I am aware of that," replied the athlete coolly. "I am going to lay for the other dog, too."

As he spoke he bent down over the dead assassin's form. It required but a moment's examination, to ascertain the fact that he was dead.

All this had occurred in the dressing-tent, and the audience had not known aught of it. But they surmised that something was wrong, when it was announced that, owing to illness, Petite Julie would have to defer her grand bareback act until the next day.

CHAPTER IV.

OVER THE PRECIPICE.

AND it was not until the next day, when a glaring account of the desperate attempt upon the life of Petite Julie, came out in the *Sunrise News*, that the denizens of the town were made aware of the truth.

Then, like the rumble of thunder came the wave of popular opinion, and there was talk of vigilance committees to hunt down the escaped would-be assassin. Ariel was made a hero in the eyes of all. The town was much astir over the affair.

Perhaps the most excited of any was Nobby Harry Hastings.

He had waited in the circus tent, hoping to get another glimpse of Petite Julie when she appeared in her grand bareback act. His disappointment was not to be expressed in words when he found that she did not come.

And when he knew the startling truth, he was beside himself with horror and chivalrous impulse. Like many another, if he could have laid hands upon the other inhuman wretch, at that moment, his life would not have been worth a rush.

All effort to find the assassin was without avail. He had taken good care to make his escape good.

And the detective Shadow Sam, had been on the lookout for Al Perkins, who, he knew, was associated with the two ruffians. But not a trace of him could be found.

"That is where their heads are level," he muttered. "They had better not show up here in this section again."

At this juncture an unexpected thing occurred. Ross Wilkins had meant to start that night for Sylvester City, a town about one hundred miles away, where he was billed to show. But an ominous warning came in time.

Sylvester City was about the same size as Sunrise, and would necessitate a long journey through a wild country, part prairie, and a mountainous section known as the Death Grip Hills. In these hills they found refuge, a gang of so-called prairie pirates, raiders of wagon-trains or the mail-coaches, under the leadership of a dashing dare-devil road rider, known as Captain Inferno.

Half-breeds, desperadoes, and outlaws of the worst class, made up Captain Inferno's band. Far and wide through the West, they were noted and feared for their deeds of lawlessness. Captain Inferno had been making preparations to raid the circus-train when it should pass through the hills, and now just in time the information had reached Wilkins. Not wishing to incur such a risk, he had brought his train to a standstill in Sunrise.

There was no doubt but that he could exhibit to paying audiences for several days in Sunrise, and he decided to do so.

Thus it happened that the circus people remained longer in the town than they had intended to.

The big tent was filled to repletion at the next performance, and everybody seemed as enthusiastic over the show as ever. Wilkins was well satisfied with the reception he had met, but he knew that such patronage could not long hold out.

He owed much to Ariel the Athlete, who really was the "great card" and won great popularity. But, the athlete had become to Wilkins a man of mystery. To be sure he was always on hand when the performance was in progress, but, at other times nobody could tell where he was. He went and came mysteriously. After his work was done he disappeared as effectually as though swallowed up by the earth.

Of course Wilkins never attempted to inquire into his favorite artist's peculiarity, but it puzzled him just the same.

Nobby Harry Hastings was a constant visitor at the show.

Petite Julie rode, to the edification and wonderment of the denizens of Sunrise, and won

fresh encomiums every day. The attempt upon her life had greatly increased her popularity. And Nobby Harry was one of her most ardent admirers.

The more he saw of her the deeper grew his interest in her. She seemed to him the personification of all that was angelic. She was constantly in his mind, figured in his dreams, and he found himself actually at length in a frame of mind, such as he had never imagined. She was but a child, he told himself, and he was at least ten years her senior, yet she was as much of a woman at thirteen as many girls at eighteen. In fact, almost before he had time to realize it, Nobby Harry found himself hopelessly, heels over head in love with the child rider!

It would seem incredible, yet it was too palpable a fact to deny. Harry had met with many society belles, and had never lost his heart. Yet he was disposed to rave over Petite Julie.

He was a young man of strong impulses, and now that he had arrived at the positive conclusion that life held no charms for him without the companionship of Petite Julie, he was disposed to take desperate chances to gain his point.

He had made the acquaintance of Wilkins, but had not summoned courage enough to approach Julie. This led him to seek Wilkins one day, in his private tent.

"Mr. Wilkins," he exclaimed as he entered. "I want to talk with you."

"Well," replied the circus manager in a friendly way. "What can I do for you?"

"You have had an opportunity to get pretty well acquainted with me since you have been in this town."

"I will admit that."

"Do you know anything wrong or questionable about me?"

"No, sir, nothing of the sort."

"That is it," asserted Nobby Harry. "Nor does any other man. I am, I trust, respected wherever known, and my family is good; moreover, I have got money. Now I have a proposition to make, which will no doubt surprise you, and may not meet with your favor."

"Eh," queried Wilkins. "What is it?"

"This little girl, Petite Julie, the child rider. I have conceived great interest in her. In fact, that interest is so strong that I am impelled to offer you this proposition: I will pay you handsomely, and take this little girl from your guardianship. I will take her to my mother, and she shall be granted all the attention, and the luxury, that money can procure. Understand, I am interested in her future, and would see her reared well."

"And is there any peril visible in her future now?" asked Wilkins coldly. "Do you suppose I would see her come to harm?"

"No," replied the young man quickly. "Only you must admit that the influence, and accomplishments, to be acquired in a wealthy and pure home, must be superior to any she could receive under the canvas."

There was respectful pleading in Nobby Harry's voice. There was no mistaking his nobility of purpose. But, Wilkins looked at him steadily and exclaimed:

"My dear young man, when Petite Julie was an infant she was placed in my charge. I will give her up only when I am laid under the sod. While I live she remains with me!"

"That is your ultimatum?"

"It is."

"But that is not reasonable," began Harry.

"It matters not," retorted Wilkins, positively.

"I have had many such offers as yours, but I am decided. You might as well talk to stone. But, my time is limited and I will ask you to excuse me."

And Harry went forth from the tent, in a more unsatisfactory frame of mind than ever. But he would not, he could not, give up the idea he cherished.

While Wilkins, left to himself, bowed his head upon his hands and murmured:

"It may be that I will have to retract that assertion. She is dearer to me than my own child!"

He was plunged into chaotic thought. But, at that moment, a light touch was upon his shoulder, and then a soft arm was twined about his neck. He looked up quickly and saw Petite Julie's angel face above him.

"Why, my dear father," she cried, (she always called him father.) "Why are you so downcast?"

"Downcast am I?" ejaculated Wilkins with a start. "Well, yes, to tell the truth, it is all about you."

"About me?"

"Yes."

A troubled look came into Julie's eyes.

"What can it be? Tell me."

"Yes I will tell you," declared Wilkins, arising and taking her in his arms. "Tell me Julie, would you ever care to leave me?"

"Leave you?" exclaimed the young girl in astonishment. "I would never leave you."

"Because I love you, as no father ever loved his child. You are an angel on earth, little Julie. Will you always cling to me as your father?"

"Of course I will."

This made Wilkins happy, and dispelled his morose thoughts. He felt sure of her loyalty. A few moments later he was alone, when his head teamster entered, and announced that the camp was short of grain. It was difficult to obtain grain in the mountainous region, and Wilkins had learned that day of an old grist-mill, far up in the hills, where it was said he could get the article of necessity.

Accordingly, impelled by this intelligence, he ordered his best saddle horse, and though it was late in the day, he set out for Wild River Mill. It was a gallop of three miles up through the hills.

The trail was not a very well defined one, and darkness came on long before he reached the mill.

But he accomplished his purpose there, and then set out in the darkness for home. He never dreamed of danger until he came to a certain part of the trail, where it led along the brow of a precipice.

Then just ahead he fancied he saw a dark form. He pulled up his horse instantly, and cried sharply:

"Who are you?"

The reply was the sharp crack of a pistol, and his horse sunk beneath him, mortally wounded. Then, as he extricated himself, and gained his feet, a couple of dark forms rushed upon him from the gloom, and he was quickly engaged in a terrible struggle with his unknown foes.

Such a struggle the pall of night never before concealed. Wilkins was plucky as a lion, but was reminded now, when too late, of the warning of the Circus Detective, Shadow Sam:

"Your life is in danger!"

The odds were too great. He realized this, yet kept up, and fought with fearful desperation. Twice he drove his foes back, and then slowly but surely he was forced to the edge of the precipice.

It was a frightful fall down there, surely, a distance of a hundred feet. Jagged rocks were at the bottom, which would seem to insure certain death.

"Who are you?" panted Wilkins, in a last effort to keep them back. "Why do you seek my life?"

But, grim silence was the only reply. Then his foot slipped over the edge. Too late one of his foes endeavored to free himself. Wilkins hung to him with desperate tenacity, and both went over into the somber abyss. There was a thud, and the survivor stood a moment upon the verge, gazing into the pitchy blackness. Not a sound came up from below, after that sickening thud.

Then the survivor shuddered, and muttered as he turned away:

"It is done. It cost the lives of both Jake and Hank, but the deed is done, and one great barrier is removed. Now for the prize."

The inky gloom swallowed up his form as he went stumbling down the mountain trail.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROAD RIDER SHOWS HIS HAND.

A GREAT crowd was gathered that night in the rear of the "Gold Brick." The gaming-tables were well filled, and the clink of gold coin mingled sharply with the hum of voices.

The place was filled with a blue haze of tobacco smoke, so that one's features were hardly distinguishable.

Standing with his back against a pillar was a man of a remarkably handsome cast of features and flashily dressed. A huge diamond of many carats graced his shirt front. His air was that of a sport, and his general appearance would attest the same.

He was gazing nonchalantly at the crowd at the bar. Though his features were handsome, yet there was a devilish expression about the mouth, and in the glitter of the dark eyes.

Nothing had occurred, thus far in the evening, to mar the monotone of the gaming-tables. But now with a suddenness which startled everybody, the door burst open, and a trumpet-like voice was wafted in from the black night without.

"What's that, stranger? Don't know me, eh? Well, I'm Hard Fist Bill, the riproaring rusher of this rooral retreat, you bet! See anything shaky in my foundation? Naw! you bet I'm a keen card and a wax-ender every time! Bet yer fifty ter twenty-five my dorg kin lick yours, and if he can't, I'll chew my moccasins. What yer goin' ter do about it! Spit it out, yer galootin' Greaser!"

It was indeed the Hard Fist who hovered a moment over the threshold, and then the heavy door shut him in out of the black night. His companion was a Mexican miner, by name, San Verdez. The latter held by the collar a small yellow, spotted with white, dog—an English bull, with a vicious aspect.

The Hard Fist also had a dog, a cross between the terrier and the thoroughbred bull. Both were savage and gamey-looking creatures.

"Senor Americano, no make such a bet, no mean it."

"Bet yer life I mean it!" roared the Hard Fist. "Pull out yer tin bank here and put up yer pile. Chuck it into the bartender's hands. If my dorg don't lick yers, in thirty minutes by ther watch, then I'll be dumfusticated with b'ar grease, if I don't eat him, collar and all. Put up yer dosh, Greaser, or shut up yer yop!"

The Mexican's eyes glittered. He held fast to his dog. By this time a great crowd had collected about the two men.

"Yer see, pilgrims," cried the Hard Fist, cocking his eye in a peculiar manner, "I met this dog-dasted Greaser up in Sylvester City yesterday, and he wanted ter bet me ten ter one he had a dorg as could lick any dorg in Sunrise. Well, now, I hev a kind of patriotic feelin' about my native city, and I jest up and told ther other dog-dasted yeller nose that I owned a dog that no danged Sylvester City purp could chew up fer a piece of india rubber. Wal, ther p'izen reptile is yer', with his dorg. Gaze on him! An' this ar' what we are down yer' fer is ter put up ther stakes, with ther gentleman at ther bar yonder."

The crowd roared at this assertion. In an instant the two dog-fighters were the center of an interested throng.

"I'll bet on ther Hard Fist!"

"I'll go yer two ter one on ther white bull!"

"Give us a fair fight!"

And in less time than it takes to tell it, bets were being freely taken, and the arrangements for the fight were made.

The Mexican put up his money, and the Hard Fist covered it. So deeply interested were the throng in the fight, that it was not difficult to persuade the hotel proprietor to allow a ring to be made in the bar-room, and the fight to take place there.

There were no stringent laws in Sunrise forbidding dog-fighting, so no fears were entertained in that direction. Sawdust was freely used upon the floor, and then the dogs were brought in.

The interest had now reached fever height. Foremost among the spectators was the man with the big diamond in his shirt front. There was a strange, hard smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

Hard Fist was as vociferous as ever. His voice rung high above all else.

"Ah, there, Buster, keep yer jaws offen my paw! Save yer snap fer ther other purp. Yer' an old beauty. Lick yer? Bah! if that Sylvester City purp licks yer, then my name is Dennis, which it ar' now ther Hard Fist. Whoop-la! bring up yer hosses."

The Mexican, Verdez, was quiet in his preparations. He was much unlike the irrepressible Hard Fist. This led many of the more discreet to back his dog in the contest.

Yet it was a hard matter to decide. It was a bit of guess-work which puzzled all. However, the odds finally settled in favor of Verdez's dog, with those who bet purely on business principles, and were free from the spirit of rivalry, which was known to strongly exist between Sunrise and Sylvester City.

And through all, the unknown sport stood a spectator, with that peculiar light in his eyes. But now he seemed seized with a sudden impulse, and advancing to Verdez, whispered in his ear. The Mexican's eyes gleamed, and he showed his glittering teeth in a smile. Then the flashy stranger turned, and cried in a loud voice:

"I'll lay any man in this crowd, four to one, that ther Greaser's dog licks ther other. Who'll go me the odds?"

All eyes were fixed upon the speaker. There was a momentary hush; then Hard Fist, with distended eyeballs, glared at the presumptuous champion.

"Dog dast my old moccasins," he blustered. "If I hadn't bet my last picayune with ther Greaser, I'd give yer odds ten ter one. Bet ag'in' my dorg, will yer? My eyes! yer ain't no Sylvester City man, then. But yer kin see ther look at yer! Hi! thar, Buster; leggo my paw, blast yer picter!"

But a man brushed past the Hard Fist now and stood quietly before the stranger sport.

"I'll have to take you," he said, coolly; "put up yer coin."

It was Ariel, the Athlete of the circus, and he became, immediately, the cynosure of all eyes. A murmur went through the crowd. The sport regarded him critically a moment, and the money was put up.

Now the dogs were brought into the ring, and the crowd drew closer. A moment of suspense, and the savage animals were let loose.

Such a sight. With maddened howls they sprung at each other, and a fight, such as few there had ever witnessed before, ensued. It was a motley scene, and to a sensitive mind might have been revolting, the excited cheering crowd of miners, and the struggling dogs, snapping and tearing at each other like miniature lions.

It was a fearful struggle. Now one seemed to have the advantage, then the other.

Hard Fist Bill was uproarious in his excitement, and when his dog was beginning to get the worst of the fight, it was necessary to hold him, to keep him from leaping into the ring.

"Go fer him, Buster!" he yelled. "Chaw him up fer bacon! Dog-dast me fer a dromedary, if he don't lick yer, I will. Hoop-la! Walk right inter him, Buster!"

The struggle between the dogs was most furious. The white bull, though, seemed to have the advantage, and the stranger sport's eyes glittered, as he noted this fact. Ariel, who stood near, seemed more intent upon gazing at him than at the dogs. It was evident that the athlete was singularly impressed with the stranger's appearance.

But now, the white bull seemed to sicken, and the thoroughbred began to get in his work. This change created a furor.

"Nothin' sure in life, even if it is a dog-fight," roared the Hard Fist, with a triumphant laugh. "I tell yer, Buster is goin' ter git thar. Hooray fer our side!"

"Two ter one on ther thoroughbred!"

"Ther white bull is licked!"

The stranger sport's face had lost its triumphant, satisfied expression now. He gazed at the fight with increasing apprehension, until he saw it was an evident fact that his dog was badly whipped, then his face turned grim as a thunder cloud.

The loud hilarious adjectives of Hard Fist seemed to have an irritating effect, and with sudden anger he turned upon him.

"Look here, pilgrim!" he cried, "don't mak so much rattle with yer mouth; yer' worse no a thrashin'-machine. Let up on yer guff."

"Eh? dog-dast me fer a dromedary!" roared the Hard Fist, gazing in astonishment at the other; "what d'yer say?"

"That's what I say."

"What?"

"Shut up yer bread-trap!"

The Hard Fist leered at the sport, and then swung one brawny arm up over his head.

"I don't allow any sich tenderfoot as you to preach ter me in *that* fashion," he shouted. "Yer kin put that down in yer pocket dictionary, an' if yer don't swallow them words, dog-dast me fer a hump er bacon if I don't lick seven kinds er soap-grease outen yer! Hooray! I'm ther rusher from Rushville! I'm—"

But, the sentence was not finished. The stranger sport's right arm flew out like a piece of machinery, and the Hard Fist went down, as though he had been struck by a trip-hammer.

As was natural, intense excitement reigned. The dog-fight now lost its interest, over this struggle between man and man. For it was a struggle instant, the Hard Fist regaining his feet quickly, and rushing upon the sport.

"Lemme at him!" yelled the big miner. "I'll chew him up. Gimme a chance!"

"Fair play!" yelled the crowd.

"Give 'em room!"

"I'll bet on ther sport!"

These were the excited cries. But now, a startling thing occurred. The Hard Fist suddenly recoiled from the embrace with his man, and a loud yell broke from his lips.

"Hoo-roo-ray!" he howled. "Pards, pilgrims, all on ye, bu'st me for a bucking burro, if that man ain't no sport—naw—look at him—he's no sport at all, now see if yer know him."

With a movement like lightning, the Hard Fist had swept hat and wig from the stranger's head. As he stood thus revealed, his features were terrifyingly familiar to almost every man present.

A wild, hoarse roar, went up from the crowd, and hands flew to pistol-butts, and knife-hafts, while the general exclamation was:

"Captain Inferno!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEARCH.

WELL, indeed, was the disguised sport known to the denizens of Sunrise. The daring road-rider of the Death Grip Hills was no stranger to those present, and with the removal of his hat and wig he stood plainly revealed.

"Captain Inferno!"

This was the name by which he was known, and it was a synonym of terror to the traveler.

One moment he stood the center of the excited crowd. Half a hundred pistols were ready to cover him, yet his face did not pale, and he did not attempt flight.

His eagle eye flashed with sudden fire, and, as though seized by a quick impulse, he made a lightning movement with his hands, and his disguise as a sport fell from him.

He stood now before them, all clad in bright red, a blood hue, with a black skull upon the breast of his tight-fitting coat. With an instant movement, a red mask covered his face!

"Now you know me better," he cried fearfully. "Yes! I am Captain Inferno, but let a man of you lay a hand upon me and he will die!"

Hardly had the words left his lips when nearly every miner in the place found himself under the cover of a deadly revolver, held in the hand of some one by his side, and who had undergone the same startling transformation of costume that Captain Inferno had, and, like him, was clad all in blood red. The explanation of this most startling denouement, was that almost one-half of the occupants of the bar-room had been the outlaws in disguise!

"It was a wild, a terrible tableau—the grizzled miners gazing into the gleaming pistol-barrels held by their scarlet-dressed foes!"

But the tableau lasted but a moment. Then Captain Inferno sprang to the door with a sarcastic laugh.

"You can see that it is useless to attempt to take Captain Inferno," he cried, "for he always has his bodyguard with him."

And, before any could recover sufficiently to act, every man of the red band had sprung out into the night. It was not until they had gone that the occupants of the bar-room collected themselves. The Hard Fist was the first to act.

"Hooray, pards!" he yelled. "Don't let 'em git out of Sunrise alive. Bu'st me fer a boom-erang! git out the Vigilantes! Now's ther time to catch Captain Inferno and his gang of devils!"

The words of Hard Fist seemed to arouse the miners, and with hoarse cries they drew their pistols and rushed out into the night in pursuit. But they were too late. There was a clatter of horses' hoofs, and a wild, blood-curdling series of shrieks, as a body of men rode like the wind down the one street of the town, and swept out of hearing into the passes of the hills.

There was intense excitement, and a talk of pursuit. No action was made, however, as it was well known to be useless to attempt to overtake the red band.

So the idea was abandoned, and the crowd returned to the bar-room, to discuss the startling occurrence. Nothing had transpired in Sunrise for many days which had occasioned so much excitement.

A quiet, but intensely interested listener to all this was Ariel, who stood apart from the rest. There was a bright light in his eyes as he muttered:

"So that is Captain Inferno, eh? He is surely a dashing fellow, but, if I mistake not, his career will be as short as it is brilliant."

With this significant exclamation he left the bar-room and made his way toward the circus grounds. Arrived there, he was about to enter a tent which was used as a living tent by the circus employees, when he received a touch upon the arm.

He wheeled quickly, and beheld a slender, shrinking form at his side.

It was Petite Julie, the child rider. Ariel, in astonishment, gazed down into her distressed though beautiful face, in the dim light.

"Oh, sir!" she asked, piteously. "What can have become of Mr. Wilkins? He has not re-

turned yet, and I fear something terrible has happened to him."

"Wilkins?" ejaculated Ariel, in surprise. "Where did he go?"

"He went to Wild River Mills, after some grain," replied the young girl. "It is long past time for him to come back, and I fear for his safety. He has been warned that assassins were on his track."

"Ah!" ejaculated Athlete, with a now fierce look in his eyes. "Did he go on horseback?"

"He did."

"There is but one road to Wild River Mills," exclaimed the athlete. "That is up the mountain, and I will organize a body of men at once, and go in quest of him. And you—"

Ariel, drew a quick, sharp breath, and clutched her arm. He drew her into the tent.

"I am going too!" cried Julie.

"No," asserted Ariel emphatically. "You are to stay here, and heed what I have to say to you. Be at no time alone, not even for a moment! Consult with no strangers. Do as I tell you, and I will go in quest of Mr. Wilkins."

His manner was firm and decisive. There was no use to argue, and Julie, knowing this, suffered herself to be led back into the tent. One of the female employees of the circus was there, and Ariel said to her impressively:

"Madge, I shall hold you responsible for the safety of Julie. Look after her, and do not leave her alone for a moment."

Then he went out again into the night. It was his purpose to rouse the circus men, and organize a relief party. But at that moment, there came the swift clatter of hoofs, and a couple of panting horses were reined up before him. One of them had a rider; the other's saddle was empty.

"Hello there," cried a voice from the night.

"Where is Mr. Wilkins?"

"Wilkins?" ejaculated Ariel. "He is not here. Who are you?"

"Not here?" and there was alarm in the speaker's voice. "Well, then, I fear something has happened to him. I have his horse here, which I caught, riderless, just outside the town. I am Harry Hastings. I thought I had better bring the word here, as soon as possible."

"You did right, Harry," said Ariel. "Is this his horse?"

The athlete stepped forward, and felt of the saddle in the darkness. Then he struck a match. He saw by its light, that there was a mistake.

"This is not his horse," he declared with thrilling tones. "It is the steed of some one of Captain Inferno's red band. The saddle and trappings are blood red in color."

"Why," ejaculated Harry, "I thought it was his horse. Am I then mistaken?"

"It is evident that you are," asserted Ariel. "But, it matters not; your motive was all right. This leads me to infer the reason for Mr. Wilkins's non-return. He has, I fear, fallen in with Captain Inferno. If so, then there is need of immediate action."

"I am with you," cried the young man, leaping from his horse. "Allow me to tender my services. What will you do first?"

Ariel did not wait to reply, but at once sprang in quest of the circus men. The alarm spread far and quickly, and in an incredibly short space of time, the athlete had collected a force, of twenty-five mounted and armed men.

And now, with Billy West, Nobby Harry and Ariel at their head, these rode away into the night, upon the quest for the missing circus manager.

Swiftly the news spread to the town, and so great was the interest in the mysterious fate of Wilkins that before daylight an armed band of Vigilantes was organized there.

No trace of Captain Inferno and his gang, beyond the riderless horse, however, could be found. There was every reason to believe that he had returned to his retreat in the Death Grip Hills.

But a clew was found a few hours after Ariel took the trail. Far up on the mountain road they came upon the dead steed of the circus manager, just where the mysterious assassin's bullet had brought him down. No trace of Wilkins was there.

Ariel, with more of skill than one would have credited a seeming novice with, examined the foot-marks upon the edge of the precipice. To his sharp eye they told the tale.

"There was a struggle," he affirmed, decisively. "He was assailed by two men, who meant to take his life. One of them went over the precipice—yes, two of them, and undoubtedly one was Wilkins."

He threw himself upon his stomach, and bending over the precipice's edge, looked down

into the chasm below. He gave an exclamation as he did so.

Then he regained his feet, and swung a lariat from his saddle-bow. Giving one end to a couple of the men, he bade them hold it taut; then throwing the other end over into the depths, he proceeded to lower himself. Down—down he went with agility, until he reached the jagged rocks below.

There was blood upon them, and in a small crevice he saw the body of a man, face downward.

It was but a moment's work to turn the corpse over, and with one glance at the battered, wolfish face he recognized it as that of the survivor of the two ruffians who had made the attempt upon Petite Julie's life. The man was dead, evidently having had his head crushed in by the fall.

"He has met a deserving fate!" muttered Ariel. "But there yet exists another assassin. He, certainly, was the one left on the cliff above."

No trace of Wilkins could be found, and after a little further investigation, Ariel was pulled up to the roadside above. He reported the facts to his comrades there.

All this had been executed in the gray light of dawn. The morning sun had now begun to shoot its rays athwart the mountain peaks, the fore-runner of a beautiful day.

Ariel was hopeful that Wilkins was alive, and believed firmly that he must have survived the fall over the precipice. There was nothing to do but to follow the chasm down and endeavor to strike the trail of the survivor, whom all believed and hoped was Wilkins.

Down the mountain-trail they rode, therefore, keeping a sharp lookout, when all at once every man was brought to a standstill by a sudden sharp report of a pistol in the path below. A voice succeeded it.

"Hillo-lo-lo-hillo!"

Quick as a flash, Ariel drew his own revolver and fired it; then responded to the call.

Around a bend in the mountain wall came a horse and rider, who was recognized as one of the miners of Sunrise.

"Hello!" yelled the new-comer. "We've found yer man. He's down to the Gold Brick, summat broke up but good for a life yet."

A wild cheer broke from the circus men, who at once rode back to Sunrise with all speed.

CHAPTER VII.

CAPTAIN INFERNO'S DARING ESCAPE.

ROSS WILKINS's life was spared by a fortunate combination of circumstances. It seemed a fatal fall for both men, as they went over the cliff, and the assassin never breathed, after striking the jagged rocks. But the circus manager fell upon his foe in such a way that, though he was stunned and bruised, yet he survived the shock.

It was fortunate that his foe was a large man, and had fallen under him. Otherwise, the consequences would have been more serious.

He lay, for some time, in a state of semi-unconsciousness, and then managed to collect his scattered senses. He found, however, that beyond a few painful bruises, he was unhurt.

It is needless to say, that he did not linger in the vicinity after recovering himself, but set out for home at once. This proved a slow and painful task in the dark, and it was in the early morning light when he finally came in sight of the town.

Here, he fell in with a number of miners, who were in quest of him, and by them he was taken to the Gold Brick. The news spread rapidly, and in less than an hour, Petite Julie was in her foster father's arms.

The circus men, with Nobby Harry and Ariel, now came back from the hills, and a general rejoicing followed. The "Gold Brick" was surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd of miners, who repeatedly cheered Wilkins.

The circus people had enlisted the good feeling and liking of the denizens of Sunrise, since their sojourn in the place. To cap the whole, Hard Fist Bill made a characteristic speech, in which he made the assertion:

"We knows a good thing when we sees it. The people of Sunrise ain't much on styles, an' highfalutins, but they're wuss nor rat p'izen, on deviltry, you bet. When any tenderfoot cums yer', and sez ter ther pilgrims of this place, I'm goin' ter give yer a good show, an' I ain't goin' ter rob yer nuther, and keeps his word, dog dast my old sculp, if we ain't goin' ter use him like a white man. Hyars three cheers, for ther circus tenderfoots."

And they were given, in right hearty shape. It was a source of much gratification to Wilkins.

to know that he had made so good an impression. By noon, he was so well restored bodily, and in mind, that he was able to arrange the afternoon performance.

It was well attended, but the circus manager's perceptive faculties were keen enough to see, that a change of base must become a consequent necessity.

He was extremely anxious to move on to Sylvester City.

He had received tidings, that the inhabitants of that place, were upon the *qui vive*, for the coming of the show. It was a dull season in the mines, and the rough miners were at a loss to know what to do. Anything, in the line of sport, or entertainment, was seized with avidity, as a means of killing time.

And so it happened, that when the Sylvester Cityites found that the great circus was being detained in Sunrise, for very fear of Captain Inferno's cut-throats, public sentiment was aroused.

This called forth a characteristic dispatch, which reached Wilkins in the middle of the afternoon.

"MR. WILKINS, Circus Manager:—

"We want see yer, in Sylvester City. We know what is keeping yer, and the citizens of this place authorize me to say, that if you'll start yer caravan for this city to-night, we will send a hundred Vigilantes into the Death Grip Hills, ter give yer safe passage to Sylvester. Answer ter onc't.

"Yours, cordially,

"THE MAYOR OF SYLVESTER."

Wilkins smiled at the peculiar wording of the message. But it was a matter of much concern to him, and he hastened to accept the offer with alacrity.

So it was arranged, that the show was to start that night, upon its overland journey to Sylvester City. As soon as it was known about town, everybody turned out, to get a final look at the attractions; Petite Julie's wonderful riding, and Ariel's marvelous feats of agility, called forth a hurricane of parting applause, and the seating capacity of the great tent, was taxed to its utmost.

Nobby Harry was present, and watched Petite Julie's graceful form, with an intensity, which betokened more than ordinary feeling. When she had left the ring, he forced his way into the dressing-tent, and endeavored to gain audience with her. To his gratification he succeeded, and in her apartment, he stood before her a moment later, somewhat abashed in her presence, but managed to contain himself enough to say:

"I felt that I must see you, and at least say a word of farewell. Pardon me, but I have felt an interest in you, of no ordinary sort. I wish to assure you, of my honorable intentions, and my sentiments, are purely those of friendship."

"I have no doubt of your sincerity," replied Julie, frankly. "I do not distrust you."

"I would like to ask one favor of you," continued Harry, his heart throbbing wildly. "You are going away, and it is hardly likely, that our paths will ever cross again."

"True," she replied. "What a cold, wide world it is. We can form no lasting ties in this life, for, we must meet with others, only to separate from them. Death robs us, sooner or later, of our dearest friends."

"But friendship is sweet," asserted Harry, eagerly. "Even though it be brief. You have cast a ray of sunlight into my life, Miss Julie, and now may I ask the favor, that you count me among your list of friends, even though we may never meet again?"

"As you please," she murmured, shyly averting her gaze. "Yes, you may content yourself with the thought, that I shall always remember you as a friend. But it is possible that we may meet again."

"Heaven grant it may be so," exclaimed the young man impulsively. "If you will say the word, Julie—"

He checked himself. He noted the hightening color of her face, and was obliged to content himself with a pressure of her hand, and a farewell word.

Outside the circus tent, Nobby Harry Hastings strolled along, unmindful of where his footsteps were carrying him, he was plunged into such an an ecstatic moment of happiness. His whole chivalrous soul was thrilled.

"I—I think she likes me," he reflected. "But what can I do? I must not pursue her, that would be unmanly; and yet if she goes from me, I may lose her. How can I give her up?"

He was never placed in such a quandary before. His aimless walk had led him from the circus ground, into a dense growth of mountain pine,

and as he halted, and came to himself, the sound of voices attracted his attention.

A screen of shrubbery concealed the speakers, and not caring to play the part of eavesdropper, Harry would have passed on, had it not been for an incident.

He was startled by a touch upon the shoulder, and wheeling about, he was face to face with Shadow Sam. A finger upon the detective's lip enjoined silence, and then he whispered:

"Keep quiet, there is villainy at work here."

As he spoke, he parted the shrubbery with one hand, and Harry saw two men, standing not ten feet away. Both were familiar to him, and caused him a great start. One was Al Perkins, the scoundrel he had thrashed a day or two before, and the other he saw with a gasp of wonderment, was no other than Captain Inferno, minus his scarlet suit.

The two arch villains were holding a confab, and every word came plainly to the hearing of both interested listeners.

"Of course, I don't want to cross plans with you, if I can help it," Captain Inferno was saying. "But I am entitled to my own ideas, and no amount of money you could subscribe, would induce me to abandon this, my favorite project."

"Then you mean to grab the girl," growled Perkins.

"I mean to have her. I have witnessed her riding in the circus, and I have fallen in love with her. I mean she shall be mine."

"My God!" mentally ejaculated Harry. "He means Julie."

"Whether she will or no?" queried Perkins.

"That is it. But she wouldn't refuse to marry me. I will make her happy."

"Egad, man. She is nothing but a child in years."

"She will soon mature," affirmed the dashing road-rider. "And I have got a charming little bower for her up in the hills. Oh, she is to be mine."

"When you get her."

"I will have her. But I want to ask you one thing. Why do you seek this girl's life?"

"Eh?" muttered the brute Perkins. "Well, she is a stumbling-block in my path. She is in my way, and her death is the only thing that will allow me to further my plans. She must die!"

"Never!" ejaculated Captain Inferno. "Why can't we compromise? I will take her to my den. She shall never trouble you again. I will answer for that."

"No!" declared Perkins decisively. "I want her life. It is the only thing that will satisfy me!"

"My soul!" gasped Nobby Harry, turning to Shadow Sam. "Let us end the existence of these conspirators against innocence here upon the spot. Down with them, I say!"

Shadow Sam was evidently of the same mind, and drew a shooter, at the same moment saying:

"Come on!"

Harry drew his revolver, and the two men sprang through the underbrush, and quick as a flash, covered Perkins and Inferno. So quickly was it done, that both were prisoners before they were hardly aware of it.

"The first man that moves is a corpse!" cried Shadow Sam sternly.

"The devil!" ejaculated Perkins, the first to speak. "We are in for it."

"You are right. You are boxed this time, my fine friends. Harry, cover your man well. You are prisoners, and will please march on before us. I mean to take you to Sunrise, where you shall have justice meted out to you."

"Justice!" sneered Captain Inferno. "Talk about justice in the mines? Judge Lynch is all the justice there is."

"Lynching would only be justice for you!" retorted Shadow Sam. "But don't make any more back talk, my friend. Come, fall in, or I will bore a hole in you."

It was a desperate moment. What could they do to help themselves? There seemed no alternative, and so, with a scowl, the road-rider faced the other way, and by the side of Perkins, started down the path through the grove.

Both Shadow Sam and Harry were elated. They felt sure of their men. And indeed, there was every reason to believe that two of the most desperate men in the West were captured. But alas! "the best laid plans oft gang a-glee." They came out of the grove suddenly, and were in sight of the circus tents, when a most unexpected thing occurred.

With a movement like lightning, Captain Inferno, whose hand had seemed to suddenly clutch a revolver from an unseen source, wheel-

ed dead about and fired at Shadow Sam. The detective's weapon exploded at the same moment, but by chance, his bullet sped wide of its mark, while the road rider's ball struck the detective's skull and stretched him out upon the ground. It was a swift and sudden turning of the tables. Nobby Harry, who had seen the movement, and seeking to save Shadow Sam, fired at the road-agent chief. But his bullet also went wide, as Perkins, quick to take the cue, sprang forward and knocked up his arm.

At the same moment he felled Harry with a swift blow upon the cranium. The scene had been witnessed by a number of the circus men, who came running up, but both Perkins and Captain Inferno were beyond pursuit.

When safe in the hills above the town, the two villains came to a halt. The dashing road-rider turned up his sleeve, saying:

"I am always prepared. If they get the drop on me, they must work quickly."

This movement revealed an elastic arrangement in the sleeve lining, by means of which a revolver could be carried in a small sheath, only to be thrown into the hand at will. It was a novel way of concealing a weapon, and had stood the inventor in good stead. Once again Captain Inferno had signaled himself by a daring escape.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ATTACK OF THE OUTLAWS.

THE bullet which struck Shadow Sam's skull did not inflict a fatal wound, though it was close call. It merely grazed the skull, producing a momentary shock and insensibility.

By the time the circus men had come up, he was on his feet and ready to pursue his men. Such a thing was useless, however, as the were now safe in the hills.

Nobby Harry was quickly revived from the blow he had received. Both were exceedingly chagrined at the turn of affairs; but they could do nothing better than to submit to the inevitable and hope for the future.

"By Heavens! I mean to help you track those villains down," he said to Shadow Sam. "Public safety demands that Captain Inferno and his band of cut-throats be captured and hung."

When the news of the affair spread through the town, there was a wave of popular sentiment excited, and talk of organizing a Vigilance Committee. But nobody seemed to take the initiative.

Nobby Harry was in earnest in his promise to help Shadow Sam track down the two scoundrels. He was actuated in this by the knowledge that Petite Julie's life was in peril. So he changed his plans, and after a conference with Shadow Sam, decided to accompany the circus troupe to Sylvester City.

"I will not show myself to her," he said resolutely. "And then she will not think I am playing the part of a sneak, and following her."

That night the circus tents were struck, and the great show left Sunrise. An hour before midnight they had emerged upon the great prairie beyond Wild River Mountains, and were headed for the Death Grip Range.

And in the rear of the train, not more than a mile, rode the two men, well armed.

They were two self-constituted detectives, Nobby Harry and Shadow Sam. The detective himself had a firm belief, that when Death Grip was reached, the circus train would be attacked by Captain Inferno.

The coach in which Julie, with other ladies of the company rode, was in the middle of the train, and by Ross Wilkins's orders, well guarded. In this manner the train kept on its way, until an hour after midnight, the Death Grip Range came in view, shadowed against the sky.

Wilkins rode in the advance, and kept continually on the lookout for the Sylvester City Vigilantes, as promised. But they did not appear, and the circus manager began to feel somewhat alarmed, as they were entering the gloomy passes of the hills.

But he hoped for the best, and adjuring all to be upon their guard, he led the way into the dark recesses.

There were so many heavy vans and wagons in the circus caravan, that it necessarily covered a great space of ground. To guard all these vans necessitated a breaking up of the force of men, and a scattering, which prevented any concentration of forces. This was all the advantage in the world to an attacking foe.

Ross Wilkins knew this, and felt extremely nervous, as he entered the hills, long known and feared as the abode of Captain Inferno's daring band. But he hoped for the coming of the Vigilantes.

Yet, as, they penetrated further into the

mountain range, there was no sign of an enemy. The pall of a black, dismal night had settled down over the ragged peaks, and it was almost impossible to define the trail. Enough could be seen of the range, however, to give one the impression that they were in some unnatural country, or "bad lands," so gnarled and deformed were even the shrubs and stones. It reminded one forcibly of Dante's version of the scenery in Hades.

This, allied with the dread reports and associations of the Death Grip Hills, served to increase the nervousness of all, and the slipping of an overweighted horse upon the ledge, or the rustle of a fox in the shrubbery, was enough to almost create a panic.

However, it was not until the blackness of the hills had swallowed up the last wagon of the circus train, that any incident of note did really occur. Then, as they were entering a deep and dark valley, a loud cry came from the rear of the train, and the clatter of horses' hoofs, and the crack of pistols, smote upon the air.

At the same moment, from the walls of the pass above, long tongues of flame shot out, illuminating the place quite plainly. They were bonfires, placed there and touched off by the foe, to enable them to attack their prey. For the trap was sprung, and the outlaws had made their attack.

The scene which followed, was one of the wildest confusion, and most horrifying in detail.

The pass seemed suddenly filled with an army of red-clad masked-demons, who shot down the circus men without mercy, overturned the cages and vans, and cut loose the horses.

Wilkins and his partner were agonized with terror, and solicitude, for their people. The Vigilantes of Sylvester had failed to meet them, a most unfortunate thing. It seemed at that moment that the train must be completely wrecked.

It was a terrible scene, beneath the glare of the cliff bonfires. The air was full of shrieks, curses, blows and pistol-shots, and dead men were falling upon all sides. Above all the confusion were visible those crimson demons, dealing death right and left.

In vain Wilkins tried to rally his men. They were all separated, and the pass was so narrow that they were in a death-trap as it were. The thing bid fair to become a wholesale massacre.

But at this most opportune moment there came a wild cheer from the valley, and the next moment the Vigilantes thundered up to the spot. They had come just in the nick of time, the tide of battle turned, and the road-riders were driven back, and finding themselves overpowered, disappeared in the fastnesses of the hills.

The circus train was saved, but not until much damage had been done and many lives lost.

Wilkins, nevertheless, was extremely thankful for deliverance, and hastened to set things to rights, as far as possible. Though one fearful catastrophe almost wrung his heart.

With the first attack of the red band, the door of the coach in which was Petite Julie, was flung open, and three of the masked men, in the light of a dark lantern, thrust their heads in.

They seemed to ignore the other occupants, and one of them said:

"There she is, boys. Lift her out."

A wild scream was wrung from Julie's lips, and she sunk back into the vehicle. The next moment she was lifted bodily out into the air and carried swiftly away through the darkness. Her soul was filled with horror at the fearful scene about her. The firing of pistols, and the loud cries of the contestants, threw her into a paroxysm of terror.

She was carried far beyond these, and when she opened her eyes again, a bandage having been slipped over them, she was in a cavern chamber, illumined in some mysterious way, with a bright light, and a man dashing dressed, with a handsome, evil cast of features, and arms folded, stood before her.

She had never seen him before, but guessed rightly, that it was Captain Inferno, of whom she had heard. He smiled at her in his evil way, and with a glitter in his eyes she did not like, exclaimed:

"Well! my little wild bird, don't flutter so; I will not hurt you. You are in the best of hands, and a gilded cage, such as you never dreamed of. It is to be all yours. Would you see it?"

Before she could resist, he seized her arm, and drew her to a door concealed by arras. He flung these aside, and she gazed into a lighted

cavern chamber, more than a hundred feet in circumference, and presenting a view of such magnificence as truly she never dreamed of.

The roof of the cavern was supported by arches of amber and ruby, which had been polished by art. The floor was of the same polished stone, and shone like burnished metal. Rugs and mats of skins were strewn about; there were rich hangings, and costly pieces of furniture, all brought from the East at enormous expense. While in the center of the polished floor was a miniature lake and fountain. It was a scene surpassing Oriental splendor, and bewildered the young girl.

The dashing outlaw chief watched the expression of her face eagerly.

"It is all to be yours, *ma chere*," he affirmed. "You will be a queen in this place, and cannot help being happy."

Petite Julie's lovely child face was scarlet in its hue, and with a strength unlooked for, she broke from his grasp. Her eyes flashed like stars as she asked:

"Who are you, and how have you dared to bring me here? I command you to take me back at once."

The outlaw chief only laughed.

"Oh, that is impossible," he cried. "Every other request shall be observed. But I have not time to talk with you further now."

He turned and gave a shrill whistle. A couple of strong women, attired in red, appeared quickly, and at a motion from him, seized Julie by the arms.

Then he disappeared. The women gently but forcibly pushed the child rider back into the other apartment. It seemed all like a hideous dream to her, yet she could not help but realize that she was a hopeless captive.

What her fate would be she could only guess. With despair wrung from the depths of her soul she turned to the two women and cried:

"Oh, for the love of Heaven, for the duty you owe one of your sex, help me! Do not suffer me to be held a captive here."

Not a line in the mobile faces of the women quivered. As well look for mercy to cold stone.

CHAPTER IX.

"THE ESCAPE BAFFLED."

THE apartment into which the women led Julie was richly furnished. An antique couch with heavy drapery sat in a corner.

"This is to be your private chamber," declared one of the women, whom Julie had heard addressed as Ann.

So overcome with despair and utter exhaustion was our heroine that she sunk helplessly upon the couch. The sewing woman without further comment left the room and she was alone.

Now that the great strain of excitement was temporarily relieved, Julie experienced a revulsion of feelings, and burst into heart-broken sobs. For some time she gave way to uncontrollable grief, then gradually a strange quiet spell came over her, exhausted nature asserted its rights and she slept.

So deep was the slumber that she was all unconscious of the re-entrance of the woman Ann, who advanced to the couch and gazed contemptuously down into the sweet, tear-stained child face upon the pillow.

The woman stood over the fair captive for some while, and a close observer would have noted that she was the victim of strange emotions.

Several times she clasped and unclosed her hands, and her features twitched convulsively. At length a few whispered words dropped from her lips.

"It is the same face. I know it. What strange fatality is this? Years have passed since then, but that moment will never fade from my memory. How like an angel she is."

Softly, without disturbing the beautiful sleeper, and reverently, she bent down and placed a warm kiss upon Julie's brow.

The child rider started slightly in her dreams, moved restlessly, and then her visitor was gone, and unconscious of all, she slept on until morning came bright and clear.

The bright glad sunlight came in through a rift in the cavern roof and made a path of light across the polished stone floor.

Julie's dreams had been sweet and peaceful, and now when she awoke once more to the bitter realization of her position, it was an unpleasant transition. She arose and dressed her hair before a mirror.

There seemed to be but one door to the room. She advanced and tried the knob of this. But it would not yield. It was firmly locked.

"Oh what shall I do," she cried, clasping her

hands tearfully. "I must escape from here in some way. Will no one come to my rescue? Will they ever find me here?"

"I think not, my dear."

She started violently at the voice which sounded almost at her elbow. The door had opened and Captain Inferno handsome and dashing in his red uniform had entered. She recoiled in unfeigned terror at his appearance.

"Have no fear, my little white dove," he cried in a voice choked with triumphant emotions. "I won't eat you. I am no ogre. Come, I must tame you, for I cannot love you always so wild as this. What! shy as ever, eh? We'll see."

He advanced toward her with open arms as though to embrace her.

Julie screamed wildly.

Hangings at the lower end of the room parted, and a third party appeared upon the scene. It was the woman Ann who had been attracted by Julie's cries.

Captain Inferno's devilish, handsome face was purple with wrath.

"What do you want?" he cried, fiercely turning upon the woman.

She cowered back at his savage manner and retreated to the hangings again.

"I ask your pardon sir," she replied. "I did not know it was you."

"When I want you I'll call you," said the outlaw chief brutally.

The woman disappeared. Julie had sought refuge at the lower end of the room. Here she made a stand and her fear seemed now to have in a measure given way to desperate courage.

"Don't touch me," she screamed. "I loathe you, I despise you; don't dare to lay a hand upon me."

"Ha, my little tigress!" cried the road-rider chief passionately. "It is useless for you to resist me. Moreover you need have no fears. I do not mean to harm you."

He halted now and stood regarding her in a half uncertain manner, his gaze betraying ardent admiration, and partly baffled purpose.

"Come, let us talk sensibly," he continued, changing his voice to pleading. "I don't want you to fear me, my little wild bird. I want you to be happy in your cage. I will not make it a prison. Listen! I swear it! I will make a princess of you, nothing that you want shall be denied you. Come! say the word and become the outlaw's bride."

Julie, with wildly-fluttering heart and pallid face, was regarding her captor with too much of terror to heed his ardent appeal. She had only the supreme consciousness of danger and could regard him as nothing more nor less than an enemy.

"If you were a man," she cried, forcibly, "you would cease to persecute a defenseless young girl. You will be sure to receive punishment for this when my kind guardian, Mr. Wilkins, learns that you have brought me here."

"What?" exclaimed the road-rider chief. "Do you think it possible for your friends to ever effect your rescue here? The Bastille was never so impervious as this place. Oh, there is no possible hope of your being rescued, or ever making an escape from here. You had better make the best of it, for you are mine, and no power on earth can wrest you from me."

He took a step nearer, but offered Julie no violence. Her little heart beat like a trip-hammer.

"Once more I make my plea," he went on, passionately. "I love you. I was made insane by my passion at first sight of you in the circus-ring. If you will only be mine, only give me your love, Julie, I swear that I will consecrate my life to your happiness."

It was an ardent appeal. But as well might Captain Inferno have addressed his remarks to the rock wall. They had no effect whatever upon Julie.

"It is useless for you to talk further," she said, decisively. "I will never marry you, sir. I would rather die. I will never change my mind."

A flush of anger mounted to the outlaw chief's temples, but he controlled himself with a strong effort and exclaimed:

"Then you scorn my offer?"

"I do," replied Julie, firmly.

He seemed to waver with conflicting emotions for a moment. Then he turned to the door of the chamber.

"I will give you more time to think the matter over," he declared. "You will change your mind, I am sure. You must not forget that your fate is in my hands."

The door closed behind him.

Now that the ordeal was over, Julie was faint and sick. She reeled to the couch and sunk down upon it.

"Oh Heaven!" she moaned, "why am I doomed to such a fate?"

She did not hear light footsteps and was not aware of the presence of another until the sympathetic face of the woman Ann appeared above her. She gave a start.

"Have no fear, miss," exclaimed the woman, "I mean no harm."

The kind words electrified Julie. In a moment she had grasped the woman's hand.

"You speak kindly," she cried. "You will be my friend. Oh that I only have one friend here in this place."

The woman placed a finger to her lips.

"Hush!" she exclaimed. "It would cost me my life, if what I say should reach his ears. Yes, I will help you."

Julie threw both arms about Ann's neck.

"Oh, you dear, kind friend," she cried, warmly. "You cannot know what a load you have lifted from my heart."

"Wait a moment," ejaculated the woman with sudden conviction.

She placed both hands upon Julie's fair head and gazed intently down into her face.

"Yes, there is no mistake," she went on. "You are the same little girl. Do you remember in St. Louis some years ago, a poor woman in a lonely garret, whose child lay dead upon its ragged cot, and there was no money to buy a coffin or pay its funeral expenses?"

Julie's face lighted up eagerly.

"I thought I had seen you before!" she cried.

"You are the woman?"

"Yes," cried Ann, with tears in her eyes. "And it was by your request that the kind circus manager gave me money to bury my child with. I have not forgotten that, and now the time has come when I can repay you."

"I was glad to aid you," declared Julie.

"I know you was," assented the woman, "and I mean to show you my gratitude. There will be a great risk, but I am going to set you free."

"Oh," cried the child rider, joyously. "Can you do it? Only give me my liberty and I will never forget you."

"There will be terrible risk, yet I mean to do it."

The woman spoke with determination.

"They will kill me if we are caught," she declared. "But I am tired of this sort of life and long for another chance in the world among good honest people."

She detailed a plan to Julie in a whisper and all arrangements for the meditated escape were made. The woman knew of a secret entrance to the cavern. It would be necessary to pass two guards, but she believed that she could drug them. Her plot was skillfully laid, and Julie, eager with anticipation and her brain bursting with tremendous excitement, awaited the coming of night for its execution.

At length the hour came. Feigning to retire Julie had extinguished her light and placed matches within reach by her bed.

Suddenly about the hour of midnight she was conscious of a form by her couch.

"Now arise silently!" said a whisper in the dark. "Use all care that you can."

Julie obeyed and placed her hand in that of the woman, who led the way across the room and out through the door into a dark passage.

Following this for some way they came to a recess lit by an oil lamp. In this small chamber sat a man with his head bowed upon his hands.

"He is sound asleep!" declared Ann. "I gave him some whisky which was drugged. We shall soon be all safe."

Julie could hardly restrain her intense nervous excitement. So vigorously did her heart beat that she fancied its pulsations could be heard some distance off.

A long dark passage lay before them. Ann led the way silently and swiftly and they had proceeded some ways when a mysterious light flooded the cave.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Ann with fearful force. "We are lost. All is up with me now!"

With the appearance of the light men seemed to rise into view from the very floor of the cavern. Loud ejaculations smote upon the air and they surrounded the foiled fugitives.

"Caught!" cried the triumphant voice of Captain Inferno. "Take the girl back to the room, Manuel. And you, Ann Smith—this is the way you repay me, is it?"

The road rider-chief bent a terrible gaze upon the unfortunate woman who was struggling in

the clutches of the brutal men. Then he raised his arm and cried loudly:

"Give to her the fate of every traitor."

"You shall not harm her," cried Julie in a futile effort to go to the woman's aid.

But she was forced away and thrust rudely back into her prison chamber. Overcome with horror and despair she was left in the darkness to await the coming of the morn.

When daylight came she was attended by the other woman. In response to Julie's agonized query she replied laconically:

"Ann is dead."

"Oh my God," cried the sympathetic young girl in a frenzy of grief. "The monsters! Have they dared to commit such a fearful act? And she gave up her life for me."

No event in the child rider's life had ever given her such a shock of horror and such agony of spirit as this fearful vengeful act of her captor, Captain Inferno.

CHAPTER X.

NOBBY HARRY'S ADVENTURE.

In the rear of the train, Nobby Harry and Shadow Sam, the detective, were the first to sight the attack of the outlaws.

Harry pulled his horse up short as he cried loudly:

"My God! Look! They have fired the train. Now, Sam, for life, forward! We must save all we can."

The detective needed no urging. He was close behind Harry as they sped up the defile at a tremendous gait. The next moment both were embroiled with the road-riders.

They fought manfully until the coming of the Vigilantes, when the battle was ended. Nobby Harry's first impulse was to ask after Petite Julie.

Then the fearful discovery was made that she was missing! Perhaps the most distracted of all, at the fearful tidings, was Ross Wilkins.

He was quickly at the head of a relief party which scoured the hills until daybreak, but without finding a trace of her.

She was in the power of Captain Inferno, there was no doubt! It almost drove Wilkins insane with anxiety and grief.

He could not leave the hills until she was rescued. Accordingly, the Vigilantes volunteered to remain the next day and institute a thorough search.

West went on with the circus train to Sylvester City, where the tents were pitched and preparations made to show.

Though they searched all that day thoroughly, exploring every nook and corner in the hills, not a trace of her captors could be found. And when night came, all, in a discouraged state of mind, were obliged to return to Sylvester City.

Nobby Harry, however, remained behind in the quest. He was ready to surrender his life. He had looked in vain for Shadow Sam; the detective had mysteriously disappeared, and he could get no trace of him.

Sitting upon his horse in the tragic pass, just as the shades of night again began to settle down, alone, and incurring a fearful risk in remaining there, Harry began to form definite plans.

"Somewhere in these hills, the outlaws have a stronghold," was his logical conclusion. "Now I must find that den, for there I am sure Julie is concealed. The cover of night will aid me."

Harry turned his horse about, and galloped up the pass for some distance. The darkness had grown deeper now, and he finally drew rein, where the mountain wall was broken, by a small verdure clad opening. Into this he turned his horse, and hopped him.

He knew that he could accomplish more on horseback, and this was the reason why he did this.

He proceeded up the pass rapidly, and then at a convenient point, turned off into the hills. He was obliged to proceed at random, as he had nothing to guide him. He had firm determination, and this gave him confidence.

Harry was not without experience in western strategy, for he had spent a season once in the Indian country, in company with a band of scouts. He could follow a trail, with almost the keenness of a born borderman, and this knowledge, stood him in good stead now.

He threaded his way among a gigantic mass of boulders, keeping ever upon the alert, and trusting to his marvelous hearing powers to guide him. The night seemed to grow blacker as he proceeded, and he could with difficulty locate his position.

But he wandered on, ever and anon bending down and placing his ear to the ground. If the outlaws had a stronghold in those hills, sooner

or later he was bound to locate it. One thing puzzled the youth much, and that was the whereabouts of Shadow Sam.

He felt sure the detective was in the hills, but just where it was hard to tell. It might be, that he was even now close upon the track of the red band. Harry regretted his separation from him.

His mind was busy with thoughts of this kind when suddenly he received a great surprise. A shadowy form seemed to arise from the ground almost in his path, and flitted on before him until the gloom swallowed it up.

Harry was not slow to act. In a moment he had cocked his revolver and started swiftly in pursuit.

"Hold on, there, pilgrim!" he cried, warningly. "Hold up! or I'll fire on ye."

The unknown did not seem disposed to heed the warning. Again Harry called, and as the order was this time disregarded, he raised his weapon and fired.

Simultaneous with the crack of the pistol there was a mocking, wild laugh, which rung fiercely among the crags about, and then all was silence. The unknown had disappeared, and though Harry made rapid and thorough search, not a vestige of his presence could be found, not even a footprint, though the young man lit a match and carefully scrutinized the ground.

"Strange," muttered Nobby Harry. "Maybe that was one of the spirits which I have heard find abode in these hills. If so, I would like to meet him again, and on more even terms."

This was the only manifestation with which he was rewarded during the night, and when day-break came he was far into the intricate passes of the hills, not having as yet accomplished any important acts.

He was assailed with hunger, and sighting a wild partridge, he shot it, and making a fire, proceeded to cook it over the coals. After satisfying his hunger, he set out again upon the quest. It was near noon when he entered a high walled pass among the hills.

And, as he turned a sudden angle he was electrified at a spectacle before him. He halted, and for a moment moved not a muscle, but gazed at the form of a man who was advancing slowly up the pass toward him.

It was Captain Inferno. He was clad in his red garb, and was walking with his gaze bent to the ground, so that he did not see Harry, until quite near him, when he raised his head with a start, to find himself covered with a pistol in the grasp of the daring youth. The tableau was a vivid one. Captain Inferno's eyes gleamed like diamonds.

"What!" he ejaculated. "How is this? You are here, and alone?"

"I am here, your Satanic Majesty," affirmed Harry, coolly. "And, like the small-pox, I have come to stay. I guess I have the drop on you, my friend."

"So you have," acknowledged the dashing outlaw chief. "But what are you doing here?"

"You can guess that I am here to demand the release of Petite Julie, the child rider, from the captivity you have enforced, the forfeit to be your life."

Harry spoke determinedly, and the outlaw chief could not help but see that he was in earnest. Yet he faced the muzzle of the weapon daringly, and almost mockingly.

"Well, I admire your pluck," he decided, with a laugh. "But I cannot commend your discretion. You have run your head into a death-trap."

"A trap?"

"Yes; these hills are my dominion. When you are here, you are upon my mercy. One wave of my hand, and you are dead. Come, lower your pistol."

Harry could not see the point. He believed the outlaw chief was playing a bluff game. There was not another human being in sight anywhere. So he continued to hold the drop upon the other.

"I must refuse your invitation," he said. "I can't see but that I have the best of the situation. I demand that you release Petite Julie, or I shall shoot you."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

Captain Inferno laughed again in his mocking way. Quick as a flash he waved his arm. True to his word, Nobby Harry fired, point-blank, at him. The bullet, at close range struck the outlaw chief's breast, and he staggered a little, but did not fall.

With the wave of his arm, red-clad forms seemed to spring from the very ground about, and before Harry could fire again, the pistol was

dashed from his hand, and he was the center of a struggling gang of men. Beneath such odds, he was speedily overpowered.

While to his bewilderment, Captain Inferno seemed none the worse for the shot he had received. The swift truth flashed across Harry's mind. Doubtless he wore a shirt of mail, which had baffled the bullet.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the outlaw chief. "You made a little mistake that time, my young friend. So you are after Petite Julie, eh? Ah, well, I will see that you are well cared for."

He spoke to his men, who lifted Harry's securely bound form above them, and set out down the defile. For some distance they traveled on, and then came out upon the verge of a deep chasm, or fissure, in the rocky surface of the ground. Here he was set upon his feet.

An inkling of the fate in store for him, now strayed across Nobby Harry's mind, and he felt a suffocating sense of despair.

"I cannot help but admire your courage," said Captain Inferno in his insinuating way. "But I can tell you that you have thrown your life away. Prepare to die, as do all who come here to meddle with the affairs of Captain Inferno. I will give you three minutes, and then you will be hung down into the unknown depths of this chasm. At its bottom runs an underground river. If you survive the fall, you can have a nice little trip on its current into the center of the earth. I wish you *bon voyage*."

"Monster!" cried Harry, a cold sweat breaking out over him. "My blood will be upon your head!"

Captain Inferno only laughed demoniacally. Once more Harry was seized by the red fiends. His bonds were cut, and powerless to help himself, he was lifted far above the heads of his enemies.

One moment his form wavered in mid-air, over the black depths of the terrible chasm. That one moment was sufficient to entail fearful suffering of mind. It was a frightful descent into the chasm, with the sluggish, swirling river below. It would seem like certain death.

His fate seemed sealed; no earthly power was at hand to save him; a fearful groan broke from his livid lips; there was one awful moment of suspense, and then—

Heavens, how that human body went hurtling down through space. Even the crimson-clad fiends themselves were impressed with the horror of the act. But it was over, and once more Captain Inferno's demoniac laugh rung among the hills.

While the mad, swirling waters of the mysterious underground river, carried Nobby Harry's handsome form away upon its surface, seemingly into the center of the earth, to be swallowed up from the sight of man forever.

CHAPTER XL

SHADOW SAM ON THE TRAIL.

SHADOW SAM had become separated from his companion Nobby Harry in the battle in the pass. What had become of him, had been a matter of no little concern to the young man, but he had become involved in thrilling and important events, in truth.

With the appearance of the Vigilantes, he knew that the circus train was saved. With this realization, he did not linger longer in the place, but set out upon an important scent.

This he gained in a peculiar way. After the melee in the pass, he saw the tall figure of a man skulking about in the bushes. At once his curiosity was aroused, and he shadowed him. Upon nearer acquaintance, he was surprised to find that the unknown was well known to him as Al Perkins.

He did not make himself known to the villain, but followed him about closely, until finally he saw him set out on horseback in the direction of Sylvester City.

The detective, not to be outdone, procured his own horse and started in pursuit. It was near morning when Perkins rode into Sylvester, and the detective was behind him when he dismounted at the "Silver Shovel," the principal hotel.

The detective took care to perfect a disguise, and then also boldly entered the place.

He saw Perkins drink at the bar, and then call for a room. After he had gone, Sam applied for a room, also, and managed skillfully to obtain one next to Perkins. Entering it, he applied his ear to the wall, and heard the rustling of paper and the scratching of a pen, which satisfied him that he was writing letters.

But the detective was not satisfied with the mere discovery. The partition between the rooms was of matched boards. An idea, novel and daring, had entered Sam's mind.

With his sharp bowie he noiselessly cut a hole in the partition, through which he could command a good view of the room. This revealed to him the fact that his surmise was correct, and that Perkins was engaged in writing.

At length, after the detective had watched him for some time, he arose and proceeded to retire. A few moments later, he was snoring in a sound slumber.

Sam gazed at the papers on the table, and was seized with a great desire to know their contents. His mind was busy, devising a scheme to capture them.

And very quickly he hit upon an idea. The partition, he found, was held at the ceiling by nothing but a rude molding.

It was but a moment's work for him to pry this off, and then he inserted his broad bowie-blade in the thin matching of the boards and slit it clear to the floor. Removing the boards silently, he forced his way through the aperture, and stood in the villain's room.

He satisfied himself that Perkins was asleep, and then examined the papers. But one was of importance, and thus it read:

"NEW YORK CITY, August —, 18—.

"MY DEAR AL:—

"Yours received, and glad to hear that all plans are working well. I have got the old covey well in hand, and think your suggestion to bring him to the mines is about right. I told him you had got track of the girl, and he was wild over it. When we get him out there, as you say, we can easily salt him down, and I trust that before this you have taken care of the girl. Don't give her a chance for life, or all is lost.

"Yours affectionately, "BESSIE."

Shadow Sam read this, to him, both enigmatical and comprehensive epistle, and was impressed with mystification and horror.

What did it mean? The "girl," he had no doubt, was Petite Julie. He could do no more, so returned to his room, and replaced the board in the partition. Then he sunk into a chair.

"My God!" he groaned, "what terrible mystery is this? Why do they seek the life of this innocent child? What hellish plot is this? Who is the writer of this note? It is a woman's handwriting."

He paced the floor in deep study. The letter had given him a new insight into matters, though it had plunged him into deeper mystery.

The letter stated that they were coming into the mines.

"When they come," muttered Shadow Sam, "then I shall be sure to unearth this affair."

It was past noon before Perkins arose from his slumber and came down stairs.

When he appeared below, Shadow Sam was on the watch for him. However, the villain's movements were not active, and he occupied the most of the time at the bar, sipping liquor.

Toward night, there came a flurry in front of the hotel. The evening mail had just arrived. With the crack of heavy whip and loud halloo, the great yellow coach had rolled up to the steps, and the passengers, six in number, were alighting.

The detective rushed to the door with the rest; but Perkins was there before him. Four of the six passengers were miners, coming to Sylvester for a change of base, and had their mining-kits with them.

The other two were a novelty in Sylvester. The first to step out was a portly, florid-faced man of sixty-five, dressed richly, with a big diamond upon his expansive shirt-front. The lady whom he assisted out was of a dark type of beauty, richly dressed, and possessed of treacherous eyes. Her gaze was instantly fixed upon Perkins, and, as Shadow Sam noted the instant recognition, he felt a thrill.

He knew at once that she was the author of the letter signed "Bessie." He gazed at her critically, and read her rightly at once as a shrewd, unscrupulous woman of the world.

"I can see it now," he muttered. "She and Perkins are hand in glove, and they are playing this old man for a sucker."

This did not explain the mystery regarding Petite Julie. Though the detective felt sure, that time would reveal much. His province now, was to watch and wait.

Perkins greeted the new arrivals warmly. The portly aristocrat, wrote the entry upon the hotel register. Sam looked at it a few moments later, and read:

"ROYAL RANSOM AND WIFE,
"New York City."

The detective shrugged his shoulders, and muttered:

"Rich as Croesus, no doubt, but he is in bad hands. I could tell him that. There is work for me here."

Once Sam managed to get near enough to the trio, to overhear a few words of conversation between them.

"Yes, I've got track of the girl, Mr. Ransom. She is riding in a circus here. I will find her for you to-day."

The old man's face, seemed to fairly beam with joy.

"Don't you think Al is a pretty good detective, husband?" queried the treacherous-eyed woman, in a cooing manner. "You know you never expected to see your grand-child in life. A great many told you, she was dead."

"Yes," ejaculated Royal Ransom, forcibly. "Yet I have always believed her alive, and if this child can be identified, as my own sweet Myrtle's child, then, Mr. Perkins, I will see that you are richly rewarded."

The villain bowed low at this. They passed from sight, and Shadow Sam sunk into a chair, overcome with the swift force of the revelation.

"Oh, now, I can see it all," he cried. "Villainy, such an absolute web of villainy, I never saw before. Now I know who Petite Julie is. She is this old millionaire's grandchild, the offspring of a deceased daughter, and in early years, she was stolen from home, and placed in Wilkins's hands. The story that Wilkins tells about her mother, is a fabrication; that she was an orphan, there is no doubt. It is easy enough to understand why Wilkins has kept her all these years from her grandparent, who would make her his heir; she was a drawing card in his circus. Ah, this is valuable, and now I believe I can uproot the villainy. But I can see the game of Perkins and this woman, who is a treacherous wife. To gain old Ransom's millions, they have conspired to put little Julie, as a possible heir, out of the way, and then murder the old man. The fear that Wilkins would come forward and claim the child's heirship, led them to seek her life, and if necessity demanded, even his. There is the whole affair in a nutshell. Hurrah! it is fortunate that I have gained possession of the black plot, just in time to avert its consequences."

Shadow Sam was beside himself with the force of the discovery. He paced the floor like a wild man. Suddenly it occurred to him to seek Wilkins, and post him in regard to the matter. He was not aware of the fact, that Julie had been kidnapped by Captain Inferno.

So, without a moment's delay, he set out for the circus ground. He found Wilkins in his tent, and burst in upon him excitedly.

The circus manager listened to his story with white face, and then cried:

"So Royal Ransom is in this town, is he? Heavens! I regret now that I did not restore Julie to him long ago. Now it is too late."

"Too late?" ejaculated Shadow Sam. "What do you mean?"

"Do you not know of it?" cried Wilkins. "She is not with me now. She was stolen away by Captain Inferno, and his band of cut-throats, that night in the pass."

"Stolen away—Captain Inferno," gasped the detective. "My God! man, what can you mean? In the hands of that monster? Then her fate is surely sealed."

"I have done everything," cried the circus manager, in despair. "But she is hopelessly beyond rescue I fear."

Shadow Sam had not recovered from his shock of horror, when the curtains of the tent parted, and a man entered. Both gave a violent start, as they saw that it was Royal Ransom.

The millionaire gazed from one to the other for a moment, and exclaimed:

"Do I have the honor of addressing Mr. Wilkins?"

"You do," replied Wilkins, recovering himself. "That is my name."

Ransom gazed at Wilkins with great intensity. Then with all solemnity he exclaimed:

"Do you know, sir, that you are guilty of an act of the grossest and most unpardonable injustice? You have perverted the life career of an innocent child; perverted it, I say, for you have deprived her of the legitimate blessing of a happy home, and a loving grandparent."

"To whom do you refer?" asked Wilkins. "Do you mean Petite Julie?"

"I believe that is the euphonious name you have given her," replied the millionaire, with censure in his tone. "Know you, that I am the child's grandfather, and consequently her lawful guardian? I demand that she be delivered into my charge at once, and I warn you, that I shall prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law."

Wilkins was deadly pale, but managed to say clearly:

"I am sorry to give you bad news, sir. I have taken good care of the child, but I will say that your heart cannot be nearer bursting than mine, when I tell you that I fear Petite Julie is lost to this life forever."

The millionaire gasped convulsively, and clung to a tent pole for support.

"What do you mean?" he muttered, huskily. "Is—she dead?"

"No," replied Wilkins. "It is a fate I fear worse than death. She is in the power of Captain Inferno, an outlaw in the Death Grip Hills. You can imagine her position."

Royal Ransom's face was livid, and he groaned with anguish of spirit.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RIVER TRAGEDY.

"HAS no effort been made to effect her rescue?" he cried. "Surely, you have not abandoned the idea?"

"We scoured the hills thoroughly with a hundred good men," replied Wilkins. "It resulted in nothing. What more could we do?"

"Keep it up," cried the millionaire, excitedly. "I tell you it is not right. The child must not be abandoned to such a fate. Call out every man in the town, and hunt down the scoundrels. I will spend my fortune. It is your duty, sir, to do all you can to atone for your wrong conduct toward this child."

Royal Ransom was fearfully excited. This was very plain to be seen. Wilkins, however, only shook his head.

"It is useless," he exclaimed. "Yet I will do all that I can. I will give the services of every man in my show for that purpose. Can I do more?"

"That is enough," said Ransom. "I will offer a reward of five thousand dollars to the man who will rescue the child. Let the men be organized at once. I will return to my hotel, and when the first tidings are brought me that Petite Julie is safe, I will pay that man five thousand dollars."

The millionaire stood a moment in the doorway of the tent. Then the curtains closed behind him, and he was gone.

At that moment also, a sudden idea came into the detective's mind. He sprung after Ransom, and overtook him ere he had left the circus grounds.

"I must speak with you, sir," he cried. "But first allow me to introduce myself. My name is Shadow Sam, and I am a detective."

"Ah, yes," said the millionaire. "Well, my time is limited—"

"Nevertheless, you must grant me time," exclaimed Shadow Sam, forcibly. "For what I say to you is of the utmost importance, and concerns your personal safety—yes, your life."

Much impressed, the millionaire said, briefly:

"Well, what have you to say?"

"You know a man by the name of Al Perkins?"

"Yes," replied Ransom. "He is a faithful worker in my employ."

"How faithful, time will reveal to you, unless you will permit me to open your eyes," exclaimed Shadow Sam. "I must tell you that Al Perkins is your worst and most deadly enemy."

"My enemy?" gasped Ransom.

"Yes," cried Shadow Sam. "More than that, he has designs upon your life. It will no doubt be hard for you to believe this, but I can give you ample proof."

"Impossible!" ejaculated the millionaire. "I cannot believe that of Perkins; why, my wife trusts him as a brother."

"It is hard for a man to tell another that his wife is recreant," said the detective, resolved to be blunt. "But I am obliged also to tell you that, Royal Ransom."

The millionaire's face was livid. For a moment he was so astounded that he could not speak.

"This is most extraordinary," he ejaculated, finally. "Why, sir, how can you have the effrontery to tell me that my wife is a traitor to me? I am tempted to resent such a thing in a forcible way. I would certainly do so if I did not think you were mad."

"Hold, Royal Ransom," cried the detective, with fearful intensity. "Don't be rash. Your life hangs in the balance. Remember what I say. I will swear to it; don't ignore my warning or you will never go back to the East, alive."

The manner more than the words impressed the millionaire. He gazed steadily at the detective a moment, and then asked, slowly:

"Why should I doubt my wife?"

"She is not true to you. She is in league with the scoundrel Perkins. They have conspired to murder you, as well as Petite Julie. The object is to get your money. Do not be blind and rashly ignore my warning. I tell you, I speak with good authority."

Ransom shook his head.

"My wife," he muttered. "No, I cannot believe that, for she shows me true affection. It cannot be so—yet—"

He bowed his head, and for a moment seemed wrapped in deep thought. When he aroused himself from it he exclaimed:

"I have no doubt of your sincerity, sir. It is hard for me to believe wrong of my wife, until I have seen it with my own eyes. Yet I will—yes I will watch, though I feel sure there is a mistake somewhere. I will see you again."

The next moment Shadow Sam was alone. He gazed after the millionaire's receding form a moment, and then muttered:

"If he only heeds that warning, there is a chance for him. If not—"

He turned sharply, and vanished in the gloom. He had hardly gone, when a dark form seemed to rise from the ground, almost where he had stood. Had the broad drooping brim of the eavesdropper's hat been lifted, the evil, smiling features of Al Perkins would have been revealed. The murderer had overheard the conversation, word for word, and an imprecation dropped from his lips.

"Ah, my fine detective," he muttered. "So you are onto my little game, eh? and Ransom is posted in regard to his wife? That is bad, and this Shadow Sam, curse him, is likely to give us trouble. That is to say, if he is permitted to go on."

He paused abruptly, and a terrible snaky gleam came into his baleful eyes. The form of the detective was out of sight in the gloom, but the assassin could hear footsteps ahead, and, guided by them, he glided, swiftly away in pursuit.

In a moment he had come in view of a man's form just ahead of him.

"It is he," he muttered. "Now if fortune favors me, I can make the final stroke. I'll settle his hash."

The form ahead kept on at a rapid gait, until Perkins noted, with a start, that they were going in the direction of the flume, or river, in which the Sylvester City Mining Company washed its ore. The assassin felt a thrill of satisfaction, for nothing could have worked better for his plans.

He crept forward swiftly, and neared the form of his victim.

They came out upon the steep banks of the flume. The intended victim halted a moment near the edge of the bank. Perkins unsheathed a murderous knife, and then, drawing a deep breath, made a quick spring forward.

In a moment he was upon his man, and a struggle, such as the spot had never before witnessed, ensued. It was a fearful swift conflict, but Perkins was heavier and stronger. The deadly knife was sheathed in the breast of his victim, and then with a hoarse cry he flung the inanimate form from him and over the edge.

Down into the river the victim hurtled. The black waters closed over him, and the assassin stood one moment, trembling with exertion, upon the bank above. Then he threw the reeking knife from him, muttering darkly:

"Ah, Shadow Sam, detective, you have followed your last scent. It was an unlucky day for you when you crossed the path of Al Perkins, and you have suffered the penalty. You are out of my path forever."

The murderer did not linger upon the scene of the fearful tragedy. He turned his steps swiftly townward, and, a half hour later, had entered the lighted bar-room of the Silver Shovel.

The hotel was similar in all respects to the Gold Brick, in Sunrise. There was the same crowd of gamblers, miners, and toughs. But Perkins only gazed at them, and then passed upstairs. In the hall he was suddenly met by a female form. It was Royal Ransom's wife.

"Bessie!" he ejaculated, "is this you?"

"Just the man I wanted to see!" cried the treacherous wife. "What arrangements have you made? When will the blow be struck?"

"It must be done at once," declared Perkins anxiously. "Oh! I have made a startling discovery, and executed one great deed to-night."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"First, I have learned that Petite Julie is in the power of Captain Inferno, and not in the

hands of Ross Wilkins. Your husband has offered five thousand dollars to the man who rescues her. More than that, do you know a dog of a detective named Shadow Sam got onto our game, and betrayed us to Ransom. There is the devil to pay, but—"

The woman Bessie nearly fell with the force of the shock occasioned by her *confrere's* words.

"My husband aware of our game?" she ejaculated. "Where is this detective now?"

"At the bottom of Wild River Flume, a corpse," exclaimed Perkins impressively. "Oh, I took care of him instant, and he will carry no tales now. We are safe on that score. Yet we must work with dispatch."

"But the child; shall we be able to remove her?"

"Perhaps not. If she is in the power of Captain Inferno, we will not need to trouble ourselves further about her. In some way, we must at once strike Ransom, before he learns any more."

"And we will do it," said the woman resolutely. "But—hist!—somebody is coming. I will see you again."

She flitted away down the hall. Perkins waited a moment, and then began to descend the bar-room.

He had hardly gone out of sight, when a shadow had seemed a heap of rubbish in a corner, began to unfold itself, like an Indian shawl, and soon stood up straight and revealed itself as a man. The dim light showed the features of Ariel the Athlete. The inscrutable expression upon his face.

"What new mystery is this?"

"What does he mean by saying Shadow Sam at the bottom of the flume? Some man has gone to his final account, I suppose. They are going to do away with the detective, eh? Well, I must be in at the death."

With this Ariel swung himself over the balusters, and disdaining to use the stairs, he came down like a cat to the floor of the bar-room. He entered the bar-room, directly to the Perkins.

As Ariel entered, suddenly the outside door was burst open, and the night air wafted in a loud commotion from without. It brought every man in the place to his feet.

"Oh, don't disturb yer nocturnal sperrits gentlemen," roared a stentorian voice. "Jes relapse into yer normal state of mind, and consider ther country safe. It's only a lone pilgrim from Sunrise, yer sister city, an' I've jest cun up ter see ther circus. Ker-whoop! hyar I am Hard Fist Bill, brother pilgrims, p'raps a leetle mite touched with tanglefoot; but, alle samee right side up, with care."

It was indeed the Hard Fist, and, as he had himself averred, more than half-seas over.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DARING RESCUE.

THAT was a terrible plunge which Nobby Harry took, down in the depths of the underground river. It would seem certain death but a kind fate spared his life for a good purpose.

Down he shot with frightful velocity. The waters of the dark stream closed over him, and the breath seemed crushed from his body.

The transition from the air into the cold waters revived him with great force, and when he came up to the surface like a cork, after his long dive, he was enabled to instinctively strike out and support himself.

He was whirled at mad speed though, down the swift current. Where he was being conveyed he hardly knew; but as the drowning man clutches at a straw, so he held on to hope, and managed to keep himself afloat.

While the mad current whirled him on and on. All was Stygian gloom. He felt damp air though, and knew that he was underground. He was conscious of being whirled over rocks, and down swift rapids, until at length he came into quiet, easy-flowing water.

Here he was enabled to swim, and struck out at random. Presently, though, his touch encountered the shore, and he dragged himself out, exhausted, upon the land.

So intense was the darkness, and so great the risk to be incurred, that he did not dare to move until daybreak. For weary hours he lay there, until at length light came.

Then he saw that he was in a vast, high arched cavern.

Through a rift in the roof, a hundred feet above, light came streaming in. The river flowed on silently among the dark arches, to what destination he could not guess.

Harry picked himself up, stiff and sore, after his experience. Yet he felt thankful for his es-

cape, and was confident of finding a way out of the cavern. He did not waste time, but at once set about the task.

But for hours he wandered aimlessly about, the cavern passages only growing more intricate. However, fortune aided him, and he found a passage at length which treaded upward. He followed this, until it grew so small that he could with difficulty squeeze his way through it upon his belly. A ray of daylight ahead was incentive for him to keep on, which he did manfully, and presently crawled out into outer air.

He lay for a moment exhausted. He was screened from a broad plateau by a dense growth of vines, and as he gazed through these, he received a thrilling start at a sight revealed to him.

The plateau was hemmed in by high peaks. At its further end was the mouth of a cavern. All this was commonplace enough, and was not what gave Harry such a start. Upon the smooth surface of the plateau was a body of men engaged in drill. They were all dressed in scarlet, and among them Nobby Harry recognized Captain Inferno.

"Heavens!" he gasped, "I have at last stumbled upon the stronghold of the road riders."

He was thrilled with joy at this realization. But his position was such that he was in imminent danger of being discovered.

His necessitated his remaining quiet still, until length he saw horses brought out, and the riders mounted these, and with Captain Inferno at their head, rode away through a narrow pass.

"They are going out upon a raid," muttered Harry. "Now is my time. I know that Petite is secreted in that cavern, and I will rescue her, or I will lose my life."

After Captain Inferno's men rode away, the plateau seemed deserted. Harry was confident that this was the entrance to the outlaws' stronghold, and determined to gain entrance to it.

After making sure that the coast was clear, he crept around the edge of the plateau, and in this way managed to reach the mouth of the cavern. And at this juncture he came near getting into serious trouble.

Just as he was about to creep into the place, a man emerged from it. It was one of the outlaw gang, and Harry nearly ran into him.

The outlaw walked rapidly across the plateau, though, and out of sight. Nobby Harry drew a breath of relief, and once more essayed to enter the cavern.

This time he met with no obstacle, and was rewarded with a striking scene. A long narrow passage, extended into a high arched cavern chamber, in the center of which burned a bright fire. About this were gathered a number of the outlaws.

The cavern chamber was fancifully decorated with skins and rich hangings. Harry did not venture to enter it, for to do so would invite the attention of the outlaws, and of course result in certain capture. So he contented himself with remaining on the outside, and watching their movements.

He secreted himself behind a shelf of rock. There was risk in his remaining in the place for even a moment, but he did not think of this. He was all intent upon the rescue of Petite Julie.

And then he was startled at the sound of female voices. They came from outside the cavern, and turning his head, Harry was electrified to see three women coming across the plateau. Two of them were the waiting women, into whose charge Captain Inferno had given Julie. The third was the child rider herself, walking between them.

The daring youth was thrilled, and his first impulse was to spring out, and make himself known to his love, but second thought restrained him.

The women were talking, and their words came plainly to Harry's ears.

"Our master is a kind man," one of them was saying. "It would be a great honor to become his wife."

"What! the wife of an outlaw?" said Julie with spirit. "That is a fate worse than death!"

"Ah, you will not always think that," said one of the women. "He is rich, and would make a queen of you."

"It will be useless for you to plead his case," said Julie. "I tell you I will die before I marry him."

"Bravo!" muttered Harry in his concealment.

And now, before more could be said, there came a loud clattering of hoofs, and once more

with loud clatter, the road-riders dashed upon the plateau, with Captain Inferno at their head.

The dashing outlaw chief flung himself from his saddle, and advanced toward Julie with beaming face.

"Ah, my little wild rose," he cried. "I am glad to see you out enjoying the air. I hope your opinion of me has become somewhat modified since yesterday."

Julie drew back instinctively, and her lip curled with scorn as she replied:

"I will never entertain a good opinion of you, sir, until you have evinced enough of manliness, to allow me to return to my father."

"What! still a spitfire," said the outlaw chief biting his lip. "Ah, well, I will tame you yet. You will learn to love me. You shall ride out with me every day. Manuel, bring out the white mustang."

In response to this command, one of the men, a Mexican, hastened into the cavern, and quickly returned leading a beautiful white horse, with a ladies' saddle upon its back.

In spite of remonstrance, Julie was helped into the saddle. Nobby Harry watched all, with breathless interest.

A sudden daring plan had found formation in his brain. Was not here a chance afforded him to make a bold strike? But it was not yet time. He would watch and wait.

Captain Inferno, then mounted his own black steed, and seizing the bridle-rein of Julie's horse, with one of his characteristic laughs galloped away across the plateau. The next moment, he was in the pass, and out of sight.

When he had disappeared, the red band all left their horses, and made a rush into the cavern. It was Nobby Harry's opportunity.

With lightning-like quickness, he sprang from his covert. One of the outlaws stood in his way, but went down like a log, with a blow from the fist of the young man. Then Nobby Harry with one leap, vaulted upon the back of one of the horses.

The movement was seen and comprehended by those in the cavern, and a wild yell went up. But too late, a dozen shots were fired after the venturesome youth. Like a flash he was across the plateau and in the pass.

Down the pass he went at a breakneck gait, and suddenly came in sight of the outlaw chief and Julie just ahead.

Captain Inferno heard the clatter of hoofs, and turned. But not in time to prevent the collision of Harry's horse with his own, and then before he had time to draw a pistol, he was involved in a desperate wrestle with his assailant from the back of the horse of each.

Harry had thrown his arms about the outlaw chief, and now dragged him completely out of his saddle. It was all done so suddenly, that Captain Inferno had scarcely time to prepare himself for action.

"Harry!" screamed Julie wildly. "Thank God, you have come to save me."

The impassioned cry thrilled Harry through and through. He paused long enough in the struggle to shout back:

"Yes—but ride for your life, Julie. Leave me here; ride—ride for your life."

The young girl heard the command, but did not obey it. She was too much fascinated with the terrible struggle, too apprehensive for its result, to think of personal safety.

There was, truly, but little chance left for the daring youth. The clatter of hoofs was heard up the defile, evidence that the road-riders were coming in swift pursuit.

Captain Inferno heard them, and gave one of his infernal laughs.

"Ha! my fine young game-cock," he yelled in a demoniac way. "So you got out of the river did you? But this time you will not escape. You shall die."

"If I die, your life shall also be sacrificed," cried Harry with deadly determination.

Captain Inferno had hung to Harry like a leech. All the while, the horse was dashing madly down the pass, Julie keeping pace on her mustang while the road-riders came on behind. Captain Inferno had a strong hold upon Harry, and the latter strove in vain to break it.

It was quite likely that Harry would have been obliged to succumb, had it not been for a fortunate circumstance. All at once, the horse sheered and just grazed the wall of the pass. Captain Inferno's head came in contact with the ledge, and he was knocked senseless. Harry released his hold, and suffered his enemy to fall to the ground.

Horried at the fate of their leader, the road-riders halted to pick him up. Harry seized the bridle-rein of Julie's horse and they dashed away madly upon the path to liberty.

When the pursuers once more got upon their track, they had gained a great lead, and were far ahead. Nobby Harry kept a straight course, trusting to chance, and fortune favoring them, they came out eventually upon a broad stretch of prairie.

Escape seemed certain.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A RIDE FOR LIFE."

THE horse which Harry bestrode was a splendid animal, and would easily have kept a lead upon the outlaw pursuers. But Julie's horse was not so fleet of foot, and speedily began to lag.

As he rode, Harry cast anxious glances back over his shoulder.

He could see that they had not any too good a chance for outriding their foes. It would become now a question more of endurance than actual speed.

Julie was thoroughly at ease in the saddle, and kept her animal up as well as she could.

"Keep up a good courage!" shouted Harry reassuringly. "We will beat them in the long race."

"Oh, what is that?" cried the young girl with sudden alarm.

She pulled her horse up almost to a canter, as did Harry also. The cause of her exclamation was a strange, dark line, which seemed to have suddenly loomed up before them, and beyond which was intense gloom. At first sight Julie had thought it a blank mountain wall.

"Oh, Harry, where are we?"

A second glance, however, was enough to reassure the young man.

"Oh, that is all right!" he cried. "Come on! We shall soon be in safety."

With a vague sense of uncertainty, Julie again whipped up her horse, and they rode nearer to the seeming wall. A dash of cool moisture upon her cheek and a nearer view caused her to comprehend that it was a heavy body of fog which rested upon a section of the prairie.

Then the fog surrounded them, and they were shut from the view of their pursuers. They could, however, hear the thunder of hoof-beats behind them.

But gradually these faded out of hearing, and soon Harry became assured that they had distanced or eluded Captain Inferno and his men. It was with a sense of great joy that they realized this.

Then the horses were slackened to a slow pace and the two young people fell into easy and enjoyable conversation.

Indeed so pleasant was it to ride along together thus and chat that both nigh forgot their recent peril and thrilling experiences. Harry took a course as direct as he could locate, for Sylvester City.

Thus they rode on for something like an hour, unheeding danger until suddenly a disaster swept down upon them.

The fog-bank terminated, and with surprising suddenness they emerged into a break in the mist which was possibly three hundred yards in circumference.

Coming out into this open place which was as light as day, Harry started and glanced about him with instinctive alarm.

At the same instant his fears found verification. A warning sound came from the upper end of the clearing in the mist and dark forms were seen to loom up, outlined in the fog.

They were those of Captain Inferno's men. It was plain that they were lying in ambush for the fugitives.

It was a moment of peril. A cool nerve and steady hand was needed, but Harry was fully equal to the emergency.

He wheeled his horse about and seized the bridle-rein of Julie's animal. The fog was broken by the road-riders who came down upon the fugitives in a bunch.

"Ha! now I've got you," yelled the familiar voice of Captain Inferno. "Surrender, or we will fire upon you."

"Never!" cried Harry with deadly determination. "You haven't caught us yet, you miserable prairie pirate."

The young man had put spurs to his horse and the animal made a bound forward. The attack of the outlaws had been so sudden though that there was little time left in which to act, and Harry's steed came in violent collision with that of one of the enemy.

Both animals were nearly knocked down by the force of the shock.

The outlaw's hands gripped Harry's shoulders and he was nearly lifted from his saddle. With tremendous exertion though he kept his seat

and actually dragged his assailant from his horse.

Breaking hold with him Harry struck another of the outlaws who had been trying to grasp the Julie's bridle-rein, and then clearing himself shouted to Julie:

"Now! Keep right with me. Give your horse the spur."

The child rider was not slow to obey. Her horse was reined about and literally breaking through the line of the enemy they were once more leading a break-neck race for life.

Into the dense fog again they plunged. This time though they had not so much of a lead and the outlaws managed to keep well upon their heels.

When it became apparent to them that their prey might escape, baffled yells welled up from the throats of the fiends.

"Fire on them," yelled Captain Inferno. "A reward to the man that brings down the abductor."

The night air was rent with a series of pistol-shots. Only the uncertain light and inaccuracy of aim spared the lives of the fugitives.

As it was the bullets whistled about them, even cutting a piece of the mane from Harry's horse's neck.

But the pursuit was too swift to last long. Gradually Harry's horse began to draw away, though Julie's steed was lagging and breathing heavily. It was evident that he must soon give out.

At this juncture they came out of the fog entirely, and were once more upon the prairie. Moonlight now illuminated all.

Harry's heart now sunk within his breast. They were very far from their destination, Sylvester City, and it seemed as if they must be surely overtaken before they could reach a place of safety.

This fear was heightened by the appearance of a broad stream of water directly before them. Harry knew that it was Wild River. It would have been necessary to have crossed this anyway in going to Sylvester, but the ford was the best and safest means and that was some miles above them. The chase had led them far out of their course.

Along the banks of the river they galloped, Harry the while looking eagerly for a suitable chance to cross.

The outlaws were now gaining upon them. Their horses seemed fresher.

"There is only one way," cried Harry finally, "and that is to swim the horses across. Have you any fears, Julie?"

"Not in the least," replied the brave girl readily. "I will follow you."

With this Harry urged his horse down the steep banks and into the water. Julie followed him fearlessly.

The animals were in the current and swimming strongly. Before they reached the other bank the outlaws came up on the shore they had just left.

"Halt, and surrender," shouted Captain Inferno, "or we will fire upon you."

But already the fugitives' horses had gained the opposite bank and were galloping away. A few ineffective shots were sent after them.

Once more Harry raised himself in his stirrups and gazed apprehensively about him. The moonlight now rendered the prairie almost as clear as daylight.

"I fear I have lost my way," he exclaimed with genuine alarm. "We have strayed so far from the Sylvester City trail that I am unable to locate our position."

"What is that?" cried the child rider, pointing to a distant dark line upon the indistinct horizon.

"It is another patch of fog, or maybe a line of timber," replied the young man. "If the latter, we are in luck."

He was at once decided to head for it. A half-hour's riding brought them near enough to the dark object to make sure that it was one of those groves of timber, which dot the Western prairie resembling an oasis in the desert.

It was a welcome discovery, for Harry knew that in its cover he could more easily manage to elude his pursuers.

A few moments later they had entered the timber growth. Their foes were not so very far in the rear for the hoof-beats of their horses could be plainly heard.

In the timber Harry drew his horse up and they treaded their way more slowly among the intricate undergrowth.

Then in the deepest and darkest part they halted. It was Harry's plan to here remain until the outlaws had passed by in their quest and then once again take to the prairie.

It was a clever bit of strategy and would have worked well but for an unfortunate incident.

The outlaws could be plainly heard swearing and crashing through the bushes. As Harry had fancied they would, they passed by the fugitives with only a few yards to intervene.

That they would have outwitted them in this manner was a sure thing, had it not been for an unavoidable mishap.

Julie, who with deep suspense and rapidly beating heart, was anxiously awaiting the passing of the outlaws, received a thrilling start of horror and fear.

A dark, nameless object loomed up close to her face. A breath fell upon her cheek, and something cold and clammy, like the touch of a corpse, came in contact with her face.

She was naturally a brave girl. But an unknown horror caused her to make a violent start, and a sharp, though partly stifled scream to break from her terrified lips.

It was an unfortunate event.

CHAPTER XV.

"OUT OF THE TRAP."

OF course the attention of the outlaws was attracted in a moment. There was a brief silence, then a number of excited ejaculations arose, and hurried footsteps from all quarters bore down upon the spot.

Their presence had been betrayed.

It was unfortunate, for had it not been pitchy dark in the place, Julie would have seen the harmless cause of her alarm and guarded against the outcry.

The fact was, Harry's horse had in his endeavor to reach the overhanging green leaves over his head, brought his nostrils in contact with Julie's face. Not knowing what the object was, the young girl was warranted in her fear.

The real trouble was apparent to both the lovers the next moment.

"Are you injured?" asked Harry, in a whisper of solicitude.

"By no means," replied Julie. "It was the horse's nose upon my cheek. It startled me. I am so sorry. We are surely betrayed now."

"Have no fears," cried Harry, gallantly. "I will find a way out of the danger."

Loud voices were all about them now. It would be but a question of short time when they would be discovered.

Harry was greatly alarmed. At no stage in the pursuit since leaving Death Grip Hills had they been placed in such positive peril.

It was almost impossible to urge the horses with any degree of speed through the undergrowth.

A man could travel faster on foot, and it would be but an easy matter for the outlaws to pull them from their horses.

But Harry was determined to sell his life to save Julie from the clutches of Captain Inferno. So without further delay he made action.

"There is but one way," he whispered to the young girl.

"What is it?" replied Julie.

"We must leave our horses."

"But can they not overtake us easier on foot?"

"Not in this thick wood. Slip down from your saddle silently. They will not dream of our leaving our horses. Let them follow them."

Julie asked no further questions, but proceeded to obey the command. A moment more and she stood by Harry's side beneath the forest arches.

"Now, cling closely to me," said Harry.

He dealt both horses sharp blows. Maddened by the pain they started away at a tremendous gait through the brush.

The ruse worked to perfection. The roadriders naturally were attracted by the horses, and started in pursuit of them.

The crashing in the undergrowth grew more and more distant. For the nonce the fugitives were safe.

"Come!" cried Harry, seizing Julie's hand, and they started rapidly away on foot in an opposite direction.

They kept on for some distance and were startled by suddenly coming into a clearing in the center of which was a log cabin.

Julie was really much exhausted. An idea occurred to Harry to seek shelter for the night in the rude structure which he found upon examination to be uninhabited. He approached it with this purpose in view, when Julie clutched his arm wildly.

"Oh, we must not go there," she cried.

"Look! What is that?"

Dark forms had emerged from the gloom back of the cabin. In the moonlight they were

imperfectly revealed as rough-clad men. Harry, who took them for the outlaws was about to retreat when a stentorian voice cried:

"Hold on a bit, strawnger. Advance and give the countersign."

The voice was familiar to Harry. A cry of joy broke from his lips. He knew the speaker to be leader of a band of hunters, by name Sam Crane, and a downright honest man. He knew their safety was at once assured.

The hunters had found camp in the woods for the night. Sam Crane listened to Harry's recital with deep interest.

"So that's ther game eh?" he muttered in his rough way. "Wal, we-uns would like a scrap wi' Captain Inferno an' his pets. Let 'em come our way."

"But I must reach Sylvester to-night," declared Harry. "Can you aid us, Sam?"

"Can I?" ejaculated the big-hearted hunter. "Well, we've got horses and we can let you have 'em and put yer on ther Sylvester trail. Is that enough?"

"I will repay you," cried Harry eagerly.

But the hunter would listen to nothing of the sort and as a consequence, the hunters kindly accorded Nobby Harry two good horses and even escorted them as far as the trail.

Once more the lovers set out for Sylvester City.

CHAPTER XVI.

A COWARDLY SHOT.

ALL in the bar-room of the Silver Shovel, had been startled by the noisy and uncereemonious entrance, of Hard Fist Bill.

When his familiar voice rung out, and it was seen that he was somewhat under the influence of liquor, the momentary excitement subsided, and the majority returned to their various occupations. The Hard Fist, was in an irrepressible mood, and suffered himself to become the center of an interested and amused crowd.

"So you Sylvester City duffers, are goin' ter have ther show, eh? Wal, yer kin bet yer pumpkin seeds, it's a bu'ster on wheels. That's what I'm down here for, an I kin cut a pigeon wing with any pilgrim yer for ther drinks. Anybody go me ther wager?"

"Give us a dance, Hard Fist!"

"Strike her up!"

"Hit 'em again!"

These were the exclamations which assailed the "Pet of Sunrise," as the Hard Fist had dubbed himself. He was in just the mood, to furnish amusement for the crowd.

"Give yer a dance?" he yelled. "Wal now that's a corker. If any tenderfoot here will say somethin' I'll go yer."

"Oh yes!" cried several in chorus. "Walk right up like a man."

With this, silver pieces rung upon the bar, and the bartender was kept busy, dealing out drinks for the crowd. When the Hard Fist had satisfied his thirst, he turned to the center of the floor, and maintaining his equilibrium with difficulty, he braced himself and yelled.

"Feller pilgrims, yer kin unbend yer ear-trumpets now, fer I'm goin' ter give yer a song I used ter sing on the stage."

By this time an immense crowd had gathered about; the "Pet of Sunrise" opened his mouth to its most capacious capacity, and with fearful discordancy began:

"He tuk me to der winder,
An' lift it up so high,
An' sez, look over yonder
To der mountings in der sky.

"Gold in der mountings—silver in der mines,
All belongs to you, ole Sam, if yer only will be mine.

"Go away, Mr. Satan;
Don't yer give me none o' yer chin,
Yer kin fool de white trash wid dat stuff,
But yer can't fool old black Sam."

The crowd roared at this effusion. It is needless to say that the Hard Fist was unmercifully guyed, but that did not disconcert him. He posed himself with the proud consciousness of a man who had accomplished a great feat.

"Reckin that's what yer call a nigger minstrel song," he cried. "But I kin sing yer a suffusion from ther bogs of old Ireland, if yer want it."

"Go in, Hard Fist!"

"Give it to us!"

With this Hard Fist, with not a bad imitation of brogue, began:

"Arrah! Mrs. McSorley had beautiful twins,
Two fat little divils they were."

The rest of this was drowned in the roars of

laughter with which the crowd greeted the effusion. But the chorus was distinguishable:

"With ther beer and ther whisky ther whole blissed night,
Faith, we couldn't stand up on our pins.
Such an illigant toime at the christening we had,
Of McSorley's most beautiful twins."

Hard Fist Bill was right in his element. How the crowd cheered and roared with laughter. It was not the words of the song, but the manner in which they were delivered, that stirred them up so.

Ariel the Athlete was a witness of all. He stood near Perkins, who seemed to be enjoying the scene. Also in the crowd, was the millionaire, Royal Ransom. But there were deep lines of anxiety upon his face, which Ariel noted.

Hard Fist Bill and his colleagues had repaired to the bar, and Royal Ransom had turned away. But Perkins approached him, and with his most sycophant smile said:

"Well, Mr. Ransom, we are in hard luck, so far as the girl is concerned."

"Yes," replied the millionaire curtly. "Look here, Perkins, I want to talk with you in private."

"Certainly!" ejaculated the villain with a start. "I am at your service."

Ariel overheard this, and now managed to gain a position near the table at which they sat. Royal Ransom's voice was stern as he looked Perkins fairly in the eye and asked:

"Al Perkins, what are your intentions?"

The villain started as though shot, and ejaculated:

"Eh!—what do you mean?"

"Just what I say; what are your intentions toward me? I have learned, from reliable source, that you have been deceiving me. Is this true?"

Needless to say that Perkins was astounded. Though with the craftiness of his nature, he composed himself, and replied guardedly:

"I really don't understand you, Mr. Ransom. I have endeavored to labor faithfully for you."

"Do you mean to say that you did not attempt Petite Julie's life?"

Perkins nearly leaped from his chair.

"Eh—who said so?" he ejaculated. "It is a lie! It was not me. Never! I defy any man to prove it."

"But, there was that of undeniable guilt in his actions which betrayed him. Royal Ransom was not deceived."

"My God!" he muttered beneath his breath. "And is my wife hand in glove with such a man as this?"

"Sit right where you are, Al Perkins," he exclaimed with a terrible earnestness. "Don't dare to move. I have unmasked you, villain that you are. Murderer, your course is run."

Ariel had been listening to all this with intense interest. He saw that a crisis was at hand when Al Perkins's hand flew to his pistol-butt.

"What do you mean?" bluffed the scoundrel. "Royal Ransom, no man living dare accuse me of such a thing. Retract your words, or I will make you suffer for them."

"Cowardly villain!" cried the grand old man, arising from his chair and pointing one finger accusingly at the wretch. "I accuse you of nothing but the truth, and I shall live to see justice meted out to you. I say again, that I have unmasked you!"

The situation was a thrilling one, and would have commanded the attention of all in the place had it not been for another affair. Hard Fist Bill had become involved in a terrible fight with a Sylvester sport, and now the crowd surged about Perkins and Ransom.

For a moment they were separated. All was inextricable confusion. The Hard Fist had downed his man, when suddenly a pistol-shot rung out.

A cry of pain arose above the din; then the crowd, horrified, separated about the prostrate form of Royal Ransom, the red life-current gushing from a wound in the temple. The shot had been fired—by whom, nobody knew. It was fatal; the hapless man was a corpse!

In an instant most intense excitement reigned in the place. Everybody looked about for the assassin, and at that moment, a puff of smoke was seen to hang over the head of Ariel, the Athlete. It was the merest sort of a circumstance, yet sufficient to turn the wave of popular belief against him.

And before the horrified Ariel could recover himself, a dozen fingers were pointed toward him.

"That's the man!"

"I saw him shoot!"

"Lynch him!"

In spite of all protestations, Ariel was seized by rude hands and roughly hustled about. Then one man, a strapping Missourian, came forward and shouted:

"I'm cap'en of the Vigilantes! For the sake of law and order in Sylvester City, this man oughter be made an example of. I'll take charge of him."

In vain Ariel protested that it was not he who had fired the shot. In truth he had seen Perkins fire it. But the crowd was like all crowds, beyond the pale of reason.

Twenty men, in their over-confidence of the truth, were ready to swear that they had seen the pistol in Ariel's hands. Moreover his revolver was examined, and one chamber found empty. To them, the evidence was conclusive.

The athlete knew full well the summary nature of Western law. Indeed, upon less evidence than this, for the crime of horse-stealing, he had seen men hung. It looked black for him.

But he had in mind one plan which he could in the extremity of the case, resort to, and which he believed would save him.

"Lynch him!"

"Make an example of him!"

These were the merciless cries. Things speedily came to a crisis, when, without further hearing, the seemingly doomed and innocent man was led out, and placed beneath a mountain pine, where in the glare of torches, a rope was placed about his neck.

Ariel was pale as a ghost. Yet he did not seem to lose his courage. Standing beneath the tree in the glare of the pitch-pine torches, he listened calmly to the words of the chief of Vigilantes.

"Pilgrim, we give ye one minnit to say yer prayers in. Yer'll have ter be expeditious."

"Gentlemen!" cried Ariel, in a ringing voice, "I realize that I am facing death. In a few moments I will be a corpse. In the name of all that is fair, can I ask the privilege of *proving* to you, if I can, that I am an innocent man?"

A murmur ran through the crowd.

"Hang him!" cried a voice.

"Give him one chance!" yelled the majority.

Ariel was about to speak again when a man burst excitedly into the crowd.

It was Ross Wilkins!

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH ALL IS CLEARED UP.

THE circus manager was a man who could wield no slight amount of influence among the miners. So great was the popularity that he had gained in Sunrise, that it extended with great force to Sylvester City.

So that now, at his appearance, the crowd fell back.

"What is this?" cried Wilkins with flashing eyes. "Who dares to say that this man is guilty? Draw upon that rope, he who dares, and I will have him court-martialed and shot, by the militia of the United States! I tell you this man is not guilty!"

There was a momentary pause; then a growl went up from the crowd. It was evident that they wanted blood, the hanging to proceed.

"We have got proof, Mr. Wilkins," said the chief of the Vigilantes.

"What proof?" Wilkins demanded, sharply, as he lifted the noose from the victim's neck.

"As many as twenty men saw him do it."

"It is a lie!" cried the circus manager hotly, then turning to Ariel: "How did you get into this trouble?"

"I chanced to be in the crowd," replied Ariel, "and I saw Al Perkins shoot the old man. The crowd fastened upon me because there was smoke over my head."

"A likely bit of evidence!" exclaimed Wilkins. "Listen, men, let us talk reason. You all have heard of Petite Julie, the child rider?"

"Yes! yes!" shouted the crowd.

"Well, the murdered man was her grandfather. He came here in quest of her. You remember that she was attacked in her tent in Sunrise, by two men, one of whom this man you would hang, shot?"

"Yes!" was the general cry.

"Well, those two ruffians are dead, but the man who backed them is in Sylvester to-night. His name is Al Perkins, and he is the murderer of Royal Ransom."

The crowd was silent and moody. It was not yet sufficiently clear to them that Ariel was innocent. So strong was the wave of popular belief that it was hard to roll it back. But, the athlete saw his chance, and now stepped forward.

"Gentlemen!" he exclaimed, "I want to speak with you one moment. I think I can convince you, that the idea that I am guilty is a most

preposterous one. I am not an assassin, but a man who makes a business of tracking down assassins. I will prove it—see!"

With this, the famed Ariel made a lightning-like motion, and pulled a wig from his head, and bared his breast, showing the skin to be white, quite at variance with the olive hue of his countenance.

"My complexion is an artificial one," he cried. "Now do you know me? I am Shadow Sam, the detective!"

The name, a synonym of fame in all the Wild West, went from lip to lip.

Not the least astonished was Ross Wilkins. But, it was undeniably the truth; Ariel the Athlete was plainly revealed to them as identical with Shadow Sam!

"It is only one of my clever disguises," explained Sam, with a laugh. "Need I say that I am innocent? In regard to the murder of Royal Ransom, I will state that Al Perkins is guilty of another murder. In the bed of Wild River you will find the body of a victim whom he mistook for me, and stabbed and flung into the Flume."

For a moment a deathlike silence seemed to reign over the throng. Then the reaction set in, and a low murmur swelled into thunderous applause.

The crowd surged forward, and the noose was removed from Shadow Sam's neck. He was seized upon the shoulders of the enthusiastic miners, and a start made to return to the Silver Shovel.

At the hotel entrance Al Perkins was standing, listening to the uproar, but firmly believing that his crime had been saddled upon another, and that Ariel's body was even now swinging in the night wind on the mountain-side. The corpse of Royal Ransom was laid out in an inner room, and the bereaved widow was making a mock show of emotion.

This was the state of affairs which the crowd found upon the return to the hotel. The first to spring in at the door and confront the murderer, Perkins, was Shadow Sam.

The tableau was a thrilling one. The scoundrel had believed his hated foe at the bottom of Wild River. How he had come to life so suddenly was to him a mystery. It aroused all the superstitious fear in the wretch's nature.

He recoiled with white face and chattering teeth. But Sam confronted him accusingly.

"Yes, I am alive!" exclaimed the detective, ironically. "It is not my ghost, you human wolf!"

"The detective!" muttered the wretch, in a dazed way. "I—I thought you—"

"Yes, you thought me at the bottom of Wild River!" cried the detective, in a hard voice. "No, Al Perkins, the man you sent to his death in that dark river was not I, as you confidently told your partner in crime—yonder woman wheeling over the corpse of the man she wronged. Oh, you devil's cub! your black plots are all exposed, your fiendish work thwarted, and I am here to see that justice is done to you both!"

A wild scream broke from the lips of the false wife. Losing her self-possession, in the conviction that they were certainly betrayed, she rushed forward, exclaiming:

"How did you let them find it out, Al? We will both hang for this now!"

The effect of this was startling. In an instant Perkins had wheeled, and cried:

"Curse you! What are you talking about, you fool?"

But Shadow Sam stepped forward and exclaimed, triumphantly:

"Self-convicted! You have betrayed your guilt. Vigilantes, there is the murderer! Do your duty!"

A wild, hoarse cry went up from the crowd, and the villain was instantly seized by strong hands. His guilt was now evident, beyond all doubt. In vain he begged, in miserable wretchedness, for his worthless life.

Western ideas of justice were aroused. A murder had been done, and it was clearly for the interest of law and order that an example be made of the assassin.

The crowd thirsted for blood, and that thirst was satisfied, for in less than twenty minutes Al Perkins swung from the pine tree, and thus expiated the crimes of an incorrigibly wicked career.

In the bar-room of the Silver Shovel, Wilkins and Shadow Sam were gripping hands. They did not care to witness the execution, though both rejoiced that the earth was rid of such a human fiend.

"Sam, you've been detective with my circus for five years," asserted Wilkins, "and I have seen you in many disguises, but never in so

clever a one as that of Ariel the Athlete. If you want to forsake the detective profession, I'll give you a high-priced contract as the leading attraction of my show. Will you take it?"

Before the detective could reply there was a sudden clatter of hoofs without, and a loud cry. The few people in the bar-room rushed to the door, and were electrified at a thrilling sight.

There, upon panting steeds, sat Nobby Harry and Petite Julie, safe, beyond the clutches of Captain Inferno and his gang.

Fortune had favored the lovers, and they outstripped their pursuers when they reached the prairie.

It was not difficult to find the Sylvester City trail, and, a few hours later, they had rode into its streets. They reached the Silver Shovel to find the place nearly deserted.

Wilkins and Shadow Sam were there, and Julie fell into the arms of the manager, who was half-delirious with delight at her safety. The crowd returned from the lynching, and, when the truth was known, the excitement became intense, and Nobby Harry came in for an ovation.

Hard Fist Bill, somewhat sobered off, honored the occasion with a characteristic speech, and altogether, it was a happy crowd at the Silver Shovel the next morning.

Nobody regretted the fate of the villain, Perkins, whose body was "planted" in an unknown grave.

At last, the clouds which had for a time overshadowed Petite Julie's career were cleared away, and the future held promise of great happiness for her.

The woman, Bessie, who had been such a false wife to Royal Ransom, turned up missing, and was never seen again by any one present at that time.

And Julie, coming into possession of her great fortune, did not forget those who had been such staunch friends to her. The loving soul dealt lovingly with all.

Perhaps Wilkins had done wrong in retaining her as the leading light of his circus, but he had loved her as his own child, and as all had turned out well, there was nothing to regret. Julie parted from him with real sorrow.

By request, and to humor the Sylvester City-ties, she rode the next day for the last time in the great circus rings. It ended her career as the child rider.

Wilkins and West's Great Circus is yet traveling through the far West, and is meeting with great success. Shadow Sam is still the renowned circus detective, but, he has never been called upon to play so shrewd a part as Ariel the Athlete since.

Though the whole affair is now but a tradition of the mines, the memory of Petite Julie, the child rider, is still very precious to all who were fortunate enough to have seen her in the ring.

Captain Inferno continued to ply his nefarious, though dashing vocation, in the Death Grip Hills, and the story of his exploits would furnish the subject-matter of a romantic narrative.

It might be well to mention one important fact, ere closing, and that is, that an engagement was made between Nobby Harry and Petite Julie, ere she returns East to take up school studies, and the day is not far distant when she will become his very own.

THE END.

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